The Cannibal and the Lamb

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The Cannibal and the Lamb

by kronette

Summary

Herein starts the slow burn, 72,000+ word gangster AU of the Hannibal-verse that has taken eighteen months to complete. You'll have to get past the icky het porn(tm) before getting to the sexyfuntimes with Hannibal and Will, but it's a hell of a ride. Some rare pairs sprinkled throughout. Each chapter will have different warnings that I'll note in the summary.

Hannibal Lecter was 24 years old when his father was killed in a shootout with the Dolarhyde Family. Will Graham was 14 years old when he was caught in the crossfire between rival Families. Jack Crawford is the FBI agent assigned to Baltimore.

Notes

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Each chapter will have different warnings that I'll note in the summary. The first chapter has the mildest rating - it will get darker as the story progresses and I'll update the tags as needed for the overall story.

If you want to read Will's backstory, I've posted it.

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal Lecter was 24 years old when his father was killed in a shootout with the Dolarhyde Family. Will Graham was 14 years old when he was caught in the crossfire between rival Families. Jack Crawford is the FBI agent investigating both of them.

Chapter Notes

> Despite the constant territory wars in the Northeastern United States, Familial control remained largely by state: du Maurier owned New York, the Harris Family Delaware, Dolarhyde ran Pennsylvania, New Jersey was owned by Hobbs Family, and the Lecter Family controlled Maryland and Virginia, creating a new hub between the north and Washington, D.C.

Hannibal Lecter was 24 years old when his father was killed in a shootout with the Dolarhyde Family, felling twelve of the Lecter Family and sixteen from Dolarhyde. Police and FBI swarmed the streets of Baltimore for weeks afterward, setting all the Families on edge.

Groomed for the role since he'd learned to talk, Hannibal was automatically appointed as the head of the Lecter Family. Maintaining a polite veneer, Hannibal identified the bodies of his father and associates, arranged their funerals, paid compensation to the families of the fallen and then secluded himself away in his father's office.

For years, he had watched his father descend into impersonal violence through guns and bombs, growing further out of touch from the visceral feel of an enemy dying by his hands. That distance, Hannibal judged, had been his father's fatal mistake.

Hannibal had researched other means of influence and thought he'd have at least ten more years before he'd have to take over from his father. It was in his long-term plan to retire the Tommy gun from the Organization, retaining hand guns as their means of protection. He wanted to focus the Organization's efforts on expanding the casinos and speakeasys, believing gambling, alcohol and prostitution to be the currency of the future. Moving up his timeline was inconvenient, but Hannibal was not one to be deterred from what he desired.

As three of his father's inner circle had been gunned down in the street, Hannibal had the dubious task of selecting people he felt he could trust to be honest with him and offer sound advice. Sadly, most of his father's legacy equated to brutal thugs who loved submachine guns, drinking and gambling their stolen money in Lecter-owned casinos. Because of the changes he intended to bring to the Organization, Hannibal selected people he could easily manipulate and control, thereby ensuring his new ideas would be implemented.

His first official act as head of the Family was to derail all discussion of retaliation against Dolarhyde, citing the high risk of exposure, the inconvenience of paying to retrieve their men from jail if they should be caught, and the cost to the families in the event of their deaths, letting the ghost of his father hang over his inner circle's head.

He lamented the lack of sophistication and style of his people, but over time, Hannibal vowed to change the face of organized crime to one that even polite society would accept.

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Will Graham was 14 years old when he was caught in the crossfire between rival Families, his light fingers not able to save him from being shot.

The swell of people crowding the streets after the shows let out was always good for pickpocketing, and that Friday night was no exception. Will usually got two or three wallets and a bracelet or ring, enough to get him by for a few weeks. Living as he did—mother dead at childbirth, father dying six months previous—he didn't fear the mob guys. He'd learned their faces years ago so he wouldn't ever mistakenly target them.

You didn't steal from Families.

It was more than just self-preservation; it was a show of respect. Most of them were good to the kids on the streets, using them as messengers to give the kids enough money to fill their bellies for a few days. Will counted himself among them: Jeanette used him as her errand boy every Wednesday and he picked up groceries for Frankie's mom twice a week.

Will caught a glimpse of Frankie holding the car door for Don Leonas Lecter outside the theater as he slipped through the crowd, lifting a wallet peeking out of a tailored jacket.

When the *rat-a-tat-tats* of the machine guns started, Will joined the crowds running away from the theaters, excitement and fear pushing adrenaline through his system. He let himself

be jostled along, slipping off rings and bracelets and shoving them in his pockets as he was swept further away from the fight.

Rather than growing quieter, the gunfire got louder. To Will's horror, people began to fall around him, blood spraying from bullets ripping through their bodies. Panic swelled in his chest and closed his throat, making breathing difficult as he searched frantically for a way out of the crush of people desperately shoving at anyone in their path.

The man in front of him jerked at the same time shocking pain blazed through Will's arm, both of them stumbling to the ground. Blood oozed through Will's fingers as he gripped his upper arm, trying to squeeze beneath the fallen man's body to protect himself from the feet battering at him.

The last thing Will was conscious of was the dead man's arm over his face, waves of panic, pain and fear like a thick liquid pouring into his lungs, choking him.

He awoke in a hospital, wary eyes glancing over the man sitting in a chair next to his bed. Will had never seen the man before, but the standard suit and weary expression screamed *cop*. Will put on his best show, fear and caution thick in his voice as he asked meekly, "Who are you?"

"Agent Jack Crawford, FBI," the big man answered, keeping his hands folded across his lap. "And you are Jeremy Sykes." When Will remained silent, Crawford raised his eyebrows and continued, "Frederick Moeller? How about Richard Heyes?" Will kept his expression calm but his heart raced as Crawford tossed a handful of wallets onto the table by the bed. "Who are you?"

Will had heard Feds were worse than the local cops when it came to beating confessions out of small guys like him, only wanting to use them to get to the bigger fish. Lying would do more harm than good, so he was only half-acting when he answered in a trembling voice, "Will Graham," keeping his gaze fixed on Crawford's hands.

"Which Family do you work for?" Crawford barked, causing Will to clutch at the bed beneath the sheet.

"None of them!" he wailed, not having to fake the tears that stung his eyes. "I'm just a kid who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I watched Lucius blow Frankie's brains all over the street. Marco was on a car hood shooting at the theater entrance, I guess aiming at Don Lecter."

A bubble of anger burst through the fear and he admitted, "Yeah, I took advantage of the confusion, but then Budgie was swinging his gun at the crowd and everything went crazy. Bullets were flying everywhere. People were falling down all around me. All I could hear were screams and gunfire. All I could taste was blood and death and pain. I couldn't breathe from people pushing me around. People fell and others just ran right over them, not caring that they were killing them…"

A hard shake to his uninjured shoulder roused him from the nightmare of his memories. He blinked up at Crawford, whose expression now bordered on curious, rather than angry.

“How’d you do that, kid?”

Will dropped his gaze to the bed. He knew better than to get lost in his memories around cops. He usually kept pinching himself when he was dragged off the streets to the police station, to keep himself from doing what he just did.

When Will didn’t acknowledge the question, Crawford elaborated, “You can remember who was there and what they did?”

Will licked his dry lips, not wanting to relive it all again, but Crawford didn’t feel like the type to let anything go. Will’s nerves prickled along his skin. “I can picture it all in my head. I can recall the details, reset the scene in my mind, like.”

He grew more nervous the longer Crawford remained silent, feeling the Fed’s thoughts and dreading the moment when he’d be given a choice that was no choice at all. Stealing money was one thing; jewelry was hard to sell and depending on what he’d actually nicked, could have him facing federal time.

Will bit back his resigned sigh as the question finally emerged as a not-so-veiled threat.

“You had over $4,000 in jewelry and $300 in cash on you when you were brought into the hospital. I could send you away for twenty years.” Crawford’s smug look filled Will with disgust, but he hid it well. “Or you could cooperate and save yourself a trip to the big house.”

Playing along despite his roiling stomach, Will replied in his best terrified voice, “What sort of cooperation do you want?” Even if it was infiltrating one of the Families, it would be better than having to fend for himself in prison.

Crawford’s answer didn’t settle his stomach one bit. “I want to use that imagination of yours.”

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Hannibal carefully, meticulously folded his hands on the mahogany table before him, measuring his breaths to control his anger. Mason Verger, the boss of one of his casinos, stood at his left, exuding arrogance and annoyance, presumably at having been called to the house at Hannibal’s request.

Hannibal had spent the past several months not just going over the books, but secretly visiting each of his newly inherited establishments, observing the atmosphere and quality of service for ideas of improvement. What he’d seen at *The Fox Tail* in The Block, however, had greatly displeased him. “What is the house cut?”

Either not caring or not sensing Hannibal’s anger, Verger snapped, “What?”

Hannibal despised repeating himself and his low opinion of Verger sank even further. “The house cut. How much do you charge the client and how much do you give to the worker servicing them?”

With a sneer, Verger answered, “Fifty bucks for a half hour. House always takes 80 percent.”

Hannibal flicked his gaze to Miss Katz, standing near the door. With a slight nod, she opened the door and escorted in a young woman, the left side of her face bruised and her lip split.

Hannibal caught and held the terrified woman's gaze. "Last night, I saw this young woman being escorted into the back rooms of *The Fox Tail*. When she did not return to the floor after an hour, I went to check on her. Imagine my surprise when I found my way into her room blocked by one of my own guards, saying that it would cost me $75 and I would have to wait my turn as several other men had booked their time with her."

Hannibal's flat, dead stare swung to Verger, whose arrogance had bled away to finally be replaced by a hint of fear. "By my calculations, $25 extra every hour for twelve hours a day, times the number of days you have worked for my family, means you owe me a quarter of a million dollars." He paused, letting that number sink in before adding, "Per worker."

He felt the unease of his inner circle as they shifted in their seats, all of them having been called in as witnesses to Hannibal's discipline. Verger's eyes still held a glint of defiance, which Hannibal secretly delighted in. "How many people do you have working the back room at *The Fox Tail*, Mr. Verger? The books say eight but I saw far more than that on the floor."

"You *lied* to the *Family*?" Ricardo Vidas hissed, clenching his fist on the table. "You *stole* from us?"

Hannibal held up his hand to stave off any further interruptions, waiting for Verger to explain himself. The man was flushed, either with rage at having been caught or humiliated at having been called out in front of the lieutenants. Either way, he should be groveling at Hannibal's feet, begging forgiveness.

Instead, Verger lifted his chin and growled, "I've got the largest weekly deposits out of all your establishments; that's a fact. Your father…"

"Is dead," Hannibal snapped, irritation causing his control to slip a fraction. "*I* am head of this Family. Show your respect to me, Mr. Verger," he demanded, vision tinting red at having to *ask* for something that was his due and right.

With great reluctance, Verger went down on one knee and bowed his head over Hannibal's pinky ring, contempt exuding from every line of his body.

Hannibal crushed Verger's hand in his own, swiftly bringing it to his mouth and sinking his teeth into Verger's inner wrist, tearing through skin and veins as he pulled his head back.

Verger's screams echoed in the soundproofed, wood-paneled room but could not be heard outside of it, his struggle to extract his hand from Hannibal's grip an amusing, if messy, entertainment.

Blood sprayed from the torn arteries across Hannibal's dark suit. Having intended the outcome of his chat with Verger to end in bloodshed, Hannibal had worn one of his oldest suits, not caring if it would be trashed at the end of the night. His only concerns for the

evening had been enforcing his rules, reaffirming expectations and establishing the punishment for disloyalty.

As Verger slowly sank into the pool of blood at their feet, Hannibal believed his concerns had been addressed to his satisfaction. He shook out his handkerchief and spat bits of stringy vein into it delicately, wiping at the blood he could feel dripping down his chin. He placed the soiled handkerchief on the table and pushed himself to his feet, disgust turning down the corners of his mouth.

"Mr. Silvestri, you are hereby appointed the new boss of *The Fox Tail*. The house take will be dropped to sixty percent across all my establishments, starting immediately. Mr. Price, please ensure my orders are relayed at once." He met the young sex worker's wide eyes, feeling her satisfaction beneath her horror. "Miss Abby, I apologize for exposing you to such a sight. Mr. Silvestri will ensure you receive the monies due to you for past services, and if you choose to continue employment, it will be at your hours and days requested."

He buttoned his blood-splattered suit jacket, calling over his shoulder as he stepped around Verger's body on his way out of the room, "Please have that pig removed from the premises."

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The Cannibal. Will shivered as Don Lecter's new nickname was whispered on the streets and in school.

Part of Crawford's "cooperation" forced Will to move in with him and his wife, Phyllis. Mrs. Crawford was nice enough about it, but suddenly having a fourteen-year-old thief from the streets living in her house put a strain between her and Crawford that Will could feel vibrate in the air whenever he was inside the house.

Another part of his cooperation had been going back to school, which secretly made Will loved. He'd hated having to stop going, but it was either that or starve without his father's income. Filling his head with new things kept his imagination from focusing on everything and everybody around him. If he was concentrating on the battle tactics used during the Revolutionary War, then he couldn't notice the wide ribbon tied around Susie Trace's neck that didn't fully cover the hickey that she'd gotten the night before from her boyfriend while they were necking at the park.

He eagerly absorbed everything the teachers gave him but couldn't resist lifting a wallet out of a man's jacket or slipping a ring off a lady's finger every few weeks. More than once he'd been told that he had the look of innocence about him, so his marks were completely unaware the nice young boy was taking something from them.

He beat the shit out of anyone who tried to give him the nickname "Baby Face" though, refusing to be labeled with such a demeaning moniker.

Whenever he returned to the Crawfords with another ripped shirt and scraped knuckles, Mrs. Crawford pressed her lips together in a thin line but said nothing, merely held out her hand for the shirt to be mended. If Crawford ever noticed Will's bruised knuckles, he kept that

knowledge to himself. He'd made it clear from the moment he got Will checked out of the hospital that he only cared about Will's mind.

Will spent his evenings locked with Crawford in his home office with crime scene photos, witness statements and police reports piled around him. He was tasked with finding the patterns in the crime scenes, some of them so gruesome that Will had nightmares for days afterward. Crawford didn't seem to notice Will's subdued manner the mornings after his nightmares, either, and Will wasn't going to give Crawford the satisfaction of seeing him weak.

His father had told him to do whatever it took to survive, and this was Will's way to survive. If he couldn't eat his breakfast, or threw up his dinner, or felt as though something was following him into his dreams, he would endure it, because it was better than prison.

When Crawford placed the latest photos of a dead man in his hands, Will's mind recoiled. Not a trace of clothing on the body, not a mark on it, not a drop of blood. Just a wrist that looked like it had been chewed by a wild animal. *The Cannibal* whispered through his mind and the photo grew damp beneath his sweaty fingers.

"One of Lecter's men, Mason Verger," Crawford recited, as dispassionate as always. "Used to run *The Fox Tail*, one of the seedier of Lecter's establishments."

Will had only seen Verger once and that was enough for him to know to keep his distance. There was a cruelty there and Will didn't want to draw Verger's attention. He warned the other kids not to try to get in Verger's good graces, and those who didn't listen, Will never saw again.

Yes, organized crime was full of law-breaking men and women, but even it had an ugly underbelly. Will had been approached by members from all the local Families, asking if he'd like to work in the back rooms. His age didn't matter; just his looks, and he was as polite as possible when he turned them down. The rumors about Verger were that he didn't ask, he *took*, and Will felt a little safer knowing the vile man was dead.

"He died from…that?" Will asked, tipping his chin toward the picture and trying not to look at the mauled flesh.

"Won't know for a few days, but unless it's poison, my guess is he bled out," Crawford mused. "What kind of animal would attack like that and not do any more damage?"

Sweat broke out along the nape of Will's neck, seeing an intelligence behind the mark. It was not made by a snarling animal, but a more sophisticated creature. One that could plan. One that could anticipate. One that wanted to inflict pain and suffering for disobedience.

Will steadied his breathing before asking, "Who's in charge of *The Fox Tail* now?"

Crawford checked his notebook. "Devon Silvestri." For the first time that evening, Crawford pinned Will with his eyes. "Why? What do you see?"

Will hated that phrase. It brought the horrors into sharp focus, bright colors and unending loops. Verger had been stripped and thoroughly cleaned, not just of any evidence, but of dignity. He was cruel and rude, treating everyone with disdain. He didn't deserve respect or dignity in death, just as he hadn't in life.

Words trembling from his suddenly numb lips, Will whispered, "He disrespected the wrong person."

Will's observation didn't lead to any arrests, but he had suspicions that he kept to himself. Even though he had only seen Don Hannibal Lecter once, even if they never crossed paths, Will had no intention of betraying the man.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Hannibal encounters Will at the opera and we learn more about Will's past.

Hannibal had been pleased by the performance of Rigoletto and opted to stay a while longer at the opera house to chat with his fellow patrons. He sipped the excellent Bordeaux, brought in by himself to stock the opera house for his attendance. He would order in regular shipments to show his appreciation for a pleasant night out.

His musings were disrupted by a quiet laugh off to his right. It shouldn’t have caught his attention with the constant background chatter and rustle of clothing, but something drew him to the sound.

Chapter Notes

Chapter tags: Because Will's 17 when he and Phyllis hook up, I had add the underage tag. Will Graham (age 17)/Phyllis Crawford, het sexual content

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It took him a moment to place which young thing had made it, as the three couples seemed to be enjoying themselves quite well. The blonde and brunet were nuzzling each other, unaware of anyone but themselves if the young man's hand tightening around the woman's waist was an indication. He dismissed them easily.

The couple directly facing Hannibal were animatedly talking and appeared to have been doing so for awhile, so it must have been the couple with their backs to him. The woman's lilac dress swept the floor, her hair done up in a flattering headband. Her gloved hand rested at the small of the young man's back, a familiarity and ease in her movements as she turned her head to whisper in the man's ear.

It was then Hannibal recognized Mrs. Dotella, widowed five months ago when her husband had been killed in the factory explosion. They had a son around nineteen years old, though Hannibal couldn't recall ever meeting him to know his features.

The young man at Mrs. Dotella's side wore a slate gray suit with wide cream stripes. Hannibal noted with distaste that his ruffled shirt cuff extended down to his knuckles where his hand rested lightly on Mrs. Dotella's hip. Hardly appropriate evening wear. If he were indeed her son, how could Mrs. Dotella have allowed…

That laugh. The light, rich sound accompanied the slight bouncing of brown curls on the young man's head. Hannibal's glass froze against his lips as the young man turned his head to brush his nose along Mrs. Dotella's cheek, full lips slightly parted and ghosting along her jawline.

Most definitely *not* her son and younger than Hannibal had presumed.

Realizing he was being incredibly rude, Hannibal finished his wine and murmured to his bodyguard that he was ready to go. Miss Katz went to fetch their coats and Hannibal was struck by the dazzling smile Mrs. Dotella gave the boy, his rapt attention on her every word igniting a disagreeable association in Hannibal's mind.

The boy was a gigolo.

As much as Hannibal detested the flaunting of paying for companionship in such a dignified place as the opera house, as a businessman, he admired the boy's boldness. Neither uncouth nor shy, the boy appeared to be holding his own among the wealthy young adults. And Mrs. Dotella appeared to be enjoying herself, though Hannibal noted her smile froze once, as if she suddenly remembered she should be mourning her husband. Seconds later, the boy ducked his head and pressed a kiss behind her ear as if he'd sensed her melancholy, easing her mind back to the discussion.

Katz returning with Hannibal's coat disrupted his observations. By the time they got to the waiting car, he had forgotten all about the boy.

Two months later at intermission for *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Hannibal again spotted the boy, only this time, he was accompanying the Widow Degrass, a much more seasoned lady than Mrs. Dotella.

Arabella Degrass was a regal woman, well spoken, educated in Europe and she dressed the part. Incredulity washed over Hannibal as the boy's appearance registered with him. A classic black coat with tails and white gloves, one hand tucked at the small of his back, onyx cufflink glinting on his sleeve, the shirt crisp and devoid of any sort of ruffle, his curly hair smoothed down to only a slight wave. A glass of wine was casually lifted to the boy's lips, but Hannibal noted the level in the glass barely changed, even after ten minutes. Merely an impression to fit in without compromising his faculties; a very smart boy, indeed.

Hannibal watched in rapt fascination as when the house lights signaled the end of intermission, the boy bowed slightly to Mrs. Degrass and offered his arm, waiting for the touch of her hand before escorting her back into the theater. Smart and well-versed in etiquette, the boy now firmly held Hannibal's curiosity.

After the curtain fell amid generous applause, Hannibal waved off Katz as he scanned the Great Hall, waiting to meet this chameleon of a boy. Hannibal was fairly certain the widow was not aware of his Family's Business, so he felt confident in introducing himself.

Spotting the couple exiting the theater from the far doorway, Hannibal strode up to them. "Mrs. Degrass," he intoned politely, waiting until she acknowledged him.

Her eyes were sharp and clear, judging him in a single glance. "Good evening," she replied, the traces of her time in Paris still evident in her accent. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

Hannibal bowed over her hand, pressing his lips to the satin fabric over her knuckles. "Hannibal Lecter, madam. I have often seen you here, but have been remiss in introducing myself as a fellow opera lover."

The dismissive wave of her hand and soft, disagreeable sound told him she had heard that far too often, but her interest was piqued when Hannibal turned to the boy, who was staring at him with wide eyes. "May I have the pleasure of your companion's name?"

Hannibal kept his facial muscles under tight control as the boy mouthed *Don*, though only the faintest trace of fear could be seen in the intelligent blue-gray eyes. "Will Graham," the boy answered, voice strong and not betraying the fear that lingered in the depths of his eyes. Alight with awe and anticipation now, Graham's gaze slid slowly downward to linger on Hannibal's pinky ring, embossed with the Lecter crest. "At your service."

Those three words had layers of meaning that Hannibal wasn't willing to decipher in the few moments they had, so he tucked them away to be examined later. "Mr. Graham. You have a singular pleasure in accompanying Mrs. Degrass."

Bright laughter startled both men and they turned their heads to see the widow holding a gloved hand to the base of her throat, her eyes crinkled at the edges in mirth. “Young man—” it took Hannibal a second to realize she was speaking to him— “Just because I’m old doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate beauty. I brought this young man to show him off and make all these stuffy patrons jealous.”

Rather than embarrassment at such a blatant admission, Graham exuded pride as he teased, “You believe flattery will win me over, but it is your intelligence and smile that sway me.”

Intrigued at Graham’s complete lack of shame, Hannibal cleared his throat delicately. “I don’t wish to delay your evening further. It was a pleasure, Mrs. Degrass. Mr. Graham.” Hannibal again bowed over the widow’s hand, touching his lips to satin, but his eyes locked onto Graham’s knowing ones.

On the ride back home, Hannibal contemplated perhaps the most unique and enjoyable request for an audience with the Lecter Family he’d ever experienced.

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Will rarely thought back on his life, marked as it was by losses: his father, his home, his freedom. His innocence. The upheavals took his life in a different direction each time, but never in a direction that he chose. Always it had been chosen for him, by circumstance or threat, and he was so *tired* of it all.

On the threshold of another potentially life-changing moment, this time of *his* choosing, he couldn’t help but recall the one bright spot of happiness cradled in the darkness of his past.

Phyllis Crawford.

Four years he’d endured under Jack Crawford’s stifling control, forced to analyze crime scene photos, spewing endless streams of conjecture that led to criminals behind bars.

Some criminals, anyway. Will grew up believing you didn’t rat out those who helped you, and both the Lecter and Harris Families had helped him at some point in his life. He’d withheld evidence he’d seen in his mind, the clear path muddled with a few choice words that left Crawford stewing in his own juices.

Crawford never suspected. The Fed was blind to everything that wasn’t a criminal activity, including his wife’s cancer. Phyllis was just as adept at misleading Crawford as Will, her demure smile able to deflect the sadness and pain in her eyes.

At first, Will had desperately wanted Crawford to *see*, as the man’s wife was slowly fading before their eyes. But as the weeks dragged on and Phyllis’ smile refused to dim, Will began to admire her strength. She didn’t *need* Crawford, but Will took it upon himself to be there for her in her husband’s stead. He carried the groceries and started the water boiling for meals. He helped her wring out the wet clothes and carried them outside for her to hang on the line. He read the morning paper to her when her headaches made it too painful to focus on the words.

Will could feel the change in her; in how she saw him. He was no longer the thief from the streets, even if he lifted a wallet now and then to stay in practice. He was no longer the angry, petulant kid who was forced into a life he didn't want. He'd learned to fight back in his subtle way, growing more confident in his ability to deflect Crawford away from what Will didn't want him to see.

He was not nearly as confident at evading Phyllis' knowing gaze or controlling the way his body reacted whenever her hand brushed his. He was seventeen years old, enticing the girls at school to let his hands wander while they kissed, but this was something else entirely.

This was long days alone until Will got home from school, Crawford not appearing until suppertime or later. This was a shared secret, Phyllis wanting to spare her husband the pain of watching her die until it was unavoidable. This was a biological need for closeness, for a connection in this world. This was Will, bombarded with hormones and emotions he was ill-equipped to handle.

The morning that Crawford took the train to DC for the week, Will felt the air shift around them. Anticipation, assurance and hunger flavored the eggs and toast they shared for breakfast.

The dishes clattered in Will's hands as he felt her breasts press against his back, her presence warm and inviting. Her hand was steady as she took the plates from him and set them in the sink. Her fingers were sure as they slipped between the buttons of his shirt, the first touch of fingertips to his skin causing a new, deep *ache* within him.

Phyllis led him upstairs to his bedroom, guiding his fingers and mouth and *dick* to initiate him in the ways to pleasure a woman; to force her mind to wander aimlessly. To lose herself to something other than her impeding death; her body's deterioration; her loss of dignity.

This was her reclamation of her life and Will lost himself again and again in her whispered words of encouragement, her smooth thighs tightening around his waist, her fingers digging into his shoulders and back, holding him to her, grounding her, making her *sing*. This was stability where her world had dropped out from beneath her.

This was not love. It would be labeled adultery if it was known outside of Will's bedroom, but it went far beyond anything Will could comprehend. It was Will wanting her to feel beautiful and vibrant and *alive*; wanting to be the one who could make her feel those things again. Knowing Crawford was incapable of it, Phyllis had known and trusted that Will would understand.

Late into the night, her gentleness transformed to defiance and rage, holding Will down onto the bed as she *took* her pleasure. Drowning in her powerful emotions, Will could only clutch at her hips and gasp for breath as he slipped further down the vortex, witnessing her terrible, beautiful darkness.

Mid-morning the next day, body aching and head swimming, he caressed her hips, sucked her breasts and kissed both sets of her full lips, wanting to counter the savagery of the night before. Thus set the pattern of the days that followed: gentle to offset the rough, intense to balance comfort. Laughter to mute despair.

The day before Crawford was due back, Phyllis observed Will as he ate breakfast, her scrutiny making him more uncomfortable than when her hands had guided him into her body for the first time. The warmth on his cheeks grew hotter as she placed eight $10 bills in his palm and closed his fingers around them. She shushed him before he had a chance to protest and her words would forever remain with him: *An adult should have a nice suit, a decent pair of shoes and a good haircut.* Her soft, sweet kiss answered all his questions, and with a grateful smile, she smoothed a hand through his unruly hair one last time before gently pushing him toward the door.

That suit was long gone, as was the one that followed it. Will adjusted the lines on the dark blue pinstripe he currently wore, tugging out the sleeves of his pale blue shirt so they were aligned perfectly, his sapphire cufflinks reflecting the light from the sconces on the wall. The aggressive pat down he'd endured had disheveled his entire outfit and he was still not satisfied that he was presentable.

He pulled gently on his vest, hearing the reassuring jangle of his fob chain. He twisted the silver ring on his finger before realizing he was stalling. He could feel the heavy weight of the bodyguard's glare at his back, the woman's annoyance at Will's hesitation intensifying his own.

Will had *asked* for this meeting, *chosen* this direction for his life, and after five weeks of agonized waiting, Will's fervent wish had been granted. His life was about to change again and he would do everything in his power to make it his own. He took a fortifying breath, willed his heart to slow to a normal pace and knocked on the heavy oak door.

His lips parted in quiet awe when Don Hannibal Lecter opened the door, stepping aside and smiling pleasantly at him. "Good afternoon, Mr. Graham. Please come in."

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal have a long talk about Will's past and his future, revealing how Will survived the past seven years since leaving Jack Crawford. Will is given an assignment to prove himself to Lecter's Organization: Alana Bloom.
...

Once inside, Hannibal leaned against the door, his hand still gripping the doorknob. How had Graham ingrained himself so quickly on his psyche? Was he making a terrible mistake in trusting Graham? Would his Organization fall by this boy’s hand?

Breathing deeply and calmly, Hannibal slowly regained control of his emotions. No, he trusted his instincts and Graham would be a good asset. Funneling all communications with Graham through Brown would alleviate any further compromises. Hannibal couldn’t afford to let loose of his control for even a moment: the beast was always coiled and ready to strike.

Chapter Notes

Tags for this chapter: Will Graham/Alana Bloom, Past Prostitution (mentioned), Explicit Sexual Content.

Watching his chameleon step into the library, Hannibal tried to find the hard edges of the rough childhood his research had uncovered, but only found steely determination padded by youthful beauty. Hannibal still marveled that Graham was 24 when his first impression presumed him to be in his late teens at the oldest. Life might not have been kind to Graham, but that hardship didn't seem to weigh on him.

Still wide-eyed, still curious, Graham's gaze traversed the length of the library as he walked at Hannibal's side, the intelligence Hannibal had seen at the theater setting Graham's eyes aflame with envy.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Graham?" Hannibal indicated a chair opposite the desk. He'd chosen the library in order to gauge if street smarts and mimicry were the extent of Graham's education and if the press of history and language would unsettle him.

To his delight, Graham looked covetous, Hannibal's observations confirmed as Graham unbuttoned his jacket in a mirror move of Hannibal's actions, slowly sinking into the chair with a quiet, "You have an impressive collection, Don Lecter."

Hannibal didn't bother to correct Graham on the outdated title. It would prove irrelevant if anything Graham said threatened the Family and Hannibal was forced to end their conversation prematurely. The thought of killing and selecting meat from Graham to savor didn't carry the same note of satisfaction Hannibal was used to. He couldn't help the almost instinctual need to *know* Graham, regardless of what this interview revealed. "I am a lover of history and appreciate intelligence," he answered Graham's compliment, settling back in his chair. "It was simply easier to stock my own library to satisfy any question I might have at any given hour."

Graham's shrewd gaze met Hannibal's and a tick at the corner of the full lips gave the impression of a smile. "And what questions do you have for me? I assume that you've researched a fair bit into my life, but your information is incomplete."

Intelligent. Fearless. *Dangerous*. The unsettling discovery that Graham had lived with the same FBI agent that had plagued Hannibal's doorstep for years cast enough suspicion of Graham's intentions that Hannibal should have denied the meeting request.

Dropping out of school the day of Crawford's wife's funeral, vanishing from Baltimore's records until four years ago when Graham took up residence in a room above a diner, dancing just outside the attention of the Families by carefully selecting his clients, all spoke of great intelligence and cunning.

Even without confirmation of Graham's whereabouts for the three years after he'd left Crawford, it would be foolhardy to accept anything the man said at face value. A gigolo and a con man, Graham had learned to be whatever was required of him. It was Hannibal's duty to glean what truths he could and determine exactly what it was that Graham wanted from the Family.

Putting aside his fascination, Hannibal asked, blunt and to the point, "How did you come to live with Jack Crawford?"

Graham's steady and strong voice recounted, "The night your father was killed, I was in the crowd around the theater."

Hannibal maintained his polite veneer, not giving away that Graham was only confirming information he already knew. Hospital records and police reports were easily bought with the right contacts, and the Lecter Family was well connected throughout Baltimore.

Graham seemed unaffected by his silence, continuing in a slightly softer tone. "I was pickpocketing and got caught up in the crush of people running away. I was shot in the arm and fell unconscious with legs scrambling all around me." Time had clearly distanced Graham from the incident but his eyes still held shadows as Graham's unfocused gaze looked through the desk. "I woke up in the hospital with Crawford at my bedside, several wallets and a handful of jewelry damning me without a word. I was given the choice to work with him or do 20 years in prison." A short, derogatory laugh added years to Graham's face, the shadows now in the hollows of his cheeks. "Not much of a choice."

Hannibal slotted the missing pieces into the information he'd gathered. Graham was a talented thief even at the age of ten, Hannibal's contact in the police sharing incidents where Graham was picked up, but never charged as he had never been caught with any stolen items.

His exhaustive research had found no connections between the Grahams and Crawfords until Crawford signed Graham out of the hospital and appointed himself guardian of the boy months after Richard Graham had passed. It was maddingly frustrating and a puzzle that Hannibal had a need to solve. "Why did he not simply throw you in jail?" he challenged, the one bit of information no amount of research or money could supply. "What was so special about you that he wanted a teenager working for the FBI?"

“I never worked for the FBI,” Graham was quick to correct him. “Crawford didn’t pay me and he never attributed anything to me in his official reports. As far as the FBI were concerned, Crawford worked alone and merely had moments of genius. But that’s not what you asked,” he acknowledged with a fleeting, weak smile.

Hannibal kept his gaze on Graham’s waning smile but he noted Graham’s hands minutely tightened on the arms of the chair before relaxing. A calculated manipulation, as all of Graham’s mannerisms and tonal inflections had been until that point. It was well done and undoubtedly fooled many who weren’t as observant as Hannibal, but reading people was something Hannibal prided himself on.

Watching a flush creep above Graham’s collar was intriguing. Nervous tics and gestures could be faked, but Hannibal had yet to meet a person who could influence the body’s involuntary responses. Whether the flush was of embarrassment or humiliation, it was clear that Graham would rather not be revealing whatever secret he harbored.

The briefest eye contact preceded Graham’s admission. “I have a unique ability to see things differently. I can recreate events in my head that I’ve witnessed or by viewing photographs, getting a feeling for why, not just how, those events played out. Crawford used me to interpret the evidence he found at crime scenes. He forced me to view the worst of humanity, but I started to see justice in the violence.” Another short, derogatory laugh bled into Graham’s snarled, “I survived three years under his control by giving him just enough information to keep from being tossed into jail.”

Hannibal rapidly connected all the loose threads. “You were the reason Crawford never had any firm evidence against me,” he surmised, watching Graham carefully.

Graham graced him with a tiny, pleased smile. “I was,” he confirmed, without a trace of braggard about him. “At first because I was terrified of you, but when Mason Verger’s photo was placed in my hands, my fear dissipated. You weren’t like your father, tolerating such ignorance and cruelty. I saw it as the start of your rising above that of a common criminal and into a man who punished the rude and unsavory. Verger was a vile, cruel waste of humanity and I was glad that he was dead.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed and he folded his hands on the desk, fixing his unblinking stare on the clever man before him. Was Graham trying to win him over to join the Family, or entrap him for the FBI? “You condone murder, Mr. Graham?” he asked lightly, a touch of menace darkening his tone.

The smile fell from Graham’s expression, all trace of amusement gone. “That wasn’t murder. That was a display of your power. Verger had disrespected you and you made an example of him, probably in front of the Family so that everyone would see what the price of disloyalty was. It was only a few months after you took over the Business and you had to set the tone for your reign.”

Hannibal caught himself before he reacted. Rumors of how Verger had died and by whom had run rampant for weeks after the body had been discovered, but Crawford had come to him with only vagaries and hypotheses.

The brash, surly FBI agent demanded to search the premises whenever Hannibal had to clean house or deal with a distasteful spy from another Family, yet never with a legal search warrant. Crawford, with his wild eyes and theories that were always *so* close, yet *just* this side of wrong that it was clear to Hannibal that he was fed misinformation. If Graham was telling the truth and he was the source of Crawford's misinformation, he had done the Lecter Family a great service.

If Graham was telling the truth.

"You are very certain of my involvement in the unfortunate death of Mr. Verger," Hannibal deflected. "Why would you want to work for a man capable of such atrocities?"

Graham's eyes rose until they locked with Hannibal's, cool and flat and devoid of nearly all emotion. Lurking deep beneath the surface calm, resentment burned brightly. "Do you know what it's like to constantly feel the edge of hunger? To lose your only living relative and survive on the streets without compromising yourself?" Graham took a deep breath that did nothing to lessen the fire in his eyes. "The first time I was approached to work in the back rooms, I was thirteen. The Family didn't care that I had a quick mind or quicker fingers. They only saw dollar signs when they looked at my face. That would have been my fate, if Crawford hadn't caught me."

Graham held his gaze, though Hannibal could sense just how much it was costing him to maintain eye contact. The damp shine of hair at his temples, the widening of his pupils, even the slight curl of his fingers broadcast the tension that sang through Graham's body. "I gave in, just a little, to have shelter and food in my belly for a few years, only to have to start again with *nothing*," he growled softly. "Then, I gave in a *lot more* because there wasn't anyone who cared if I lived or died."

Graham's harsh, unsteady breath could be heard over the ticking of the grandfather clock and his hands finally unclenched from the arms of the chair. "Survival. That's why I'm here. I don't want that to be my life anymore. I want the security of a bed and food without having to find my next mark and hope they'll want me for more than a few days." Graham swallowed thickly. "I know it's only a matter of time before I pick the wrong client and piss off a Family. I can feel the air being squeezed in my lungs and I want to make a choice, now, before it's made for me."

Again wasn't spoken, but Hannibal heard it nonetheless. Hannibal was not the unfeeling monster that rumors portrayed him to be. He was not immune to the struggles of orphans living on the streets, nor of those who had to work the back rooms because they had no one else to provide for them. It was one of many reasons why he'd chosen Verger to set the tone for his reign, as Graham had put it.

That didn't mean he was going to embrace Graham into the Family, based on a fantastical story that happened to fit in with the information Hannibal already knew. No, too many questions remained unanswered, the most obvious the missing three years away from Baltimore. He softened his tone as he asked, "When you left Crawford after his wife's death, where did you go?"

Graham's expression darkened and his mouth pulled down at the corners. "Chesapeake City."

“That’s where you worked the back rooms.” Hannibal presented it as fact and caught the pained glaze that slid over Graham’s eyes before he blinked and it was gone.

“Eight months,” Graham admitted, shifting uneasily in his chair. “And only because I was starving and desperate. I’d tried legitimate jobs but they didn’t pay enough to feed me, let alone afford a place to sleep. I couldn’t risk getting caught lifting wallets for fear the cops would send me back to Crawford. I’d seen how the street workers were abused and figured a House would have rules in place about client behavior. I found a place that treated me well enough until a new Boss took over. He threw out the old rules and contracts, demanding that I accommodate every client request. I was ordered…I had to…”

Graham’s voice faded to nothing, his gaze dropping somewhere beside the desk and lost to the past. Anger and fear poured off of Graham in waves, with traces of disgust roiling beneath the tremulous emotions.

An echo of that disgust resonated in Hannibal as he remembered how Verger had run *The Fox Tail* like a prison and the workers like horses to be mounted until they passed out from exhaustion. It wasn’t hard to imagine Graham trapped in similar circumstances. “Why leave Baltimore?” he questioned. “You might have known some of the clientele if you’d stayed here.”

Graham shook his head slowly. “I wanted to get as far from Crawford’s reach as I could and I didn’t want my garbage stinking up my backyard. Baltimore will always be my home.”

Hannibal hummed his approval, though Graham was no longer focused on him, once again pulled in by his past. Graham was vulnerable and open, in the perfect place for Hannibal to manipulate him to his will, but something held him back. Graham was no more than an elevated gigolo, but the shadows between his words held promise; promise that was rare enough in Hannibal’s world that his intrigue outweighed his need to control. For now, anyway. “Yet you returned to Baltimore and started up your own independent prostitution business.”

“I didn’t come back right away,” Graham said, feeding Hannibal more information on his missing three years. “I didn’t have any plans when I left Chesapeake City, but about halfway home, I just couldn’t face it. I holed up in a barn until the owner found me. He was kind enough to give me a job for two seasons instead of having me arrested for trespassing.” Graham looked slightly pasty and his sickly chuckle was subdued. “I thought about what I wanted. What I got wasn’t my intention, but it’s what I was able to make of my life.”

All of Hannibal’s instincts went on alert as Graham pushed himself to his feet. Dragging his fingertips along the top of the desk as he rounded it to stand in front of Hannibal, Graham flicked his tongue to wet his lower lip and tilted his head down, a perfect picture of salacious youth. Graham sat on the edge of the desk, parting his legs just enough to show the meat of his thighs as he leaned forward, lips brushing the edge of Hannibal’s ear as he murmured, “Because of my imagination, I can be whoever my clients want. I can be whatever age they want. I can give them exactly what they need, even if they don’t know what that is. And I don’t have to fuck them to do it.”

Hannibal regulated his breathing carefully, not allowing himself to be tempted by the wide-eyed, seductive boy. It was at the forefront of his mind that Graham could easily slip a hand beneath the edge of the desk, retrieve the hidden knife and plunge it into his heart. Graham could *try*—Hannibal's reflexes were as exceptional as his peripheral vision.

In the next second, Graham drew back and settled his hands on his thighs, slowly rubbing them sensually down to his knees. "I use people for what they give me: money, clothes, jewelry. I make no apology for that because it's a mutually beneficial relationship. They know what they're buying me for and I provide the companionship they need. The lines blur on occasion, but it's a choice I make, not a provision of our contract. The ones who only want me for sex believe that gives them the right to use my body however they choose, so I refuse their business."

Wary but intrigued, Hannibal allowed a minute smile before he went for the jugular: "You've had to defend yourself."

Graham flinched and the young seducer fell away as quickly as if he were a crumb rolling down his shirt. His mouth pressed into a thin line as he returned to his chair, Graham's eyes now flashing with anger with color high on his cheeks. "Yes," he hissed.

The air was heavy with Graham's admission, Graham's face and neck flushed and Hannibal experiencing an emotion that had been dormant for years: sexual desire. Hannibal had no doubt Graham knew exactly what he was doing, and that he would know that Hannibal was on to him. It was like a game of chess, move and countermove thought out six moves ahead. Hannibal was captivated and hesitated to unravel the seductive web that Graham had woven around him. "That's the real reason you returned to Baltimore, isn't it?" Hannibal surmised, beginning to understand his chameleon.

Graham kept his head held high, but Hannibal could see the nervousness skittering just beneath the surface. "You want details or will a name suffice?"

"Who you worked for and where, will be sufficient for now," Hannibal replied magnanimously, pleased that Graham wasn't simply handing over the information, but making him work for it. Making him appreciate the value and what it cost.

"*The Boxcar*," Graham supplied, slowly relaxing back in his seat. "Abel Gideon was running it when I left."

Hearing Gideon's name caused a sour taste at the back of Hannibal's tongue. A most detestable man sharing Mason Verger's callousness, skirting the edges of Hannibal's rules about workers and wages. Graham was lucky to escape with all his body parts intact. Gideon had not been so fortunate, Hannibal's Regional Boss finally getting hard evidence of Gideon's underhanded dealings and an example made of him to the Family.

Hannibal had gone over *The Boxcar*'s books himself after Gideon had been disposed of, but could not recall if Graham's name had been on the employee list. He would have to contact Smitty to retrieve the books from storage and review them.

He found himself leaning forward, enraptured by the tint that still colored Graham's cheeks. "I will, of course, have to confirm your story," he pronounced, waiting for Graham's nod of acceptance. It was doubtful Graham would dare try to con him with a lie so easily disproved, but Hannibal left no room for betrayal or doubt in his background checks. "You'll need to prove yourself to me," he intoned darkly, curious to see how Graham would react.

"Anything," Graham offered without hesitation and Hannibal smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes.

"That is a very broad term, Mr. Graham. I will take you up on that offer if you're not careful," Hannibal warned, wanting to shake loose some of the confidence that clung to Graham.

Graham took the time to reconsider his offer, Hannibal's eyes taking in every flinch, every twitch, every bead of sweat that rolled down Graham's temple to be lost in his hair. "I won't whore myself out. To men. That's my only stipulation."

Hannibal nodded his acceptance of the provision, looking off into the distance as if he were contemplating Graham's assignment. "Randall Tier. You are familiar with him?"

Graham's flicker of surprise was quickly followed by narrowed, suspicious eyes. "Middle guy in Hobbs' Organization. Doesn't have the boss's ear but does have the respect of the men beneath him."

Graham didn't demand to know why Hannibal had brought up a man immediately after stating he wouldn't seduce a man, which Hannibal found refreshing. Graham knew when to hold his tongue and curb his temper; that was an excellent start. "His girlfriend, Alana Bloom, has been spotted at *High Pointe* far too often to be a coincidence. I believe she's there to spy on my Business. I want you to find out what she's doing and what she knows."

Worry battled with concern in Graham's eyes for a brief moment. "What if she suspects what I'm doing?"

Hannibal felt his smile stretch to crinkle at the corner of his eyes. "Mr. Graham, you have charmed your way into a meeting with me, told me you're a con man, fed me a story about working with the FBI and yet I'm still willing to trust you. If you are incapable of keeping your true feelings from one woman, then my faith in you is sorely misplaced."

A dark, knowing smile curled Graham's lips and pride shone from his eyes. "How soon do you need the information?"

Hannibal's laugh was quiet, but genuine. "I would prefer within a few weeks, but I don't know what your normal time frame is for research and seduction. I leave it up to you, but I do want a thorough report on Miss Bloom's activities."

Graham smiled and shifted forward in his seat, obviously eager to get started. "I won't disappoint you."

The unfortunate phrase had been heard by Hannibal far too often and was far too often proven incorrect. Hannibal's disappointment in his lieutenants' recruits left him pained and fearing for the future of the Organization. He only hoped his instincts were correct about Graham.

Graham's nervousness returned and startled Hannibal into sitting back in his chair, wondering if his thoughts had shown in his expression.

"May I?" Graham asked as he rose out of the chair, walking cautiously around the desk to stand before Hannibal.

Understanding warmed Hannibal's gaze and he tilted his head down toward his hand. His lungs expanded in a slowly indrawn breath as Graham sank to one knee, damp fingers pressing into Hannibal's palm as Graham's forehead touched the back of Hannibal's hand.

Hannibal thought that was the end of it, but then Graham's head shifted and soft lips pressed to the Lecter crest, parting slightly to breathe warm air over Hannibal's fingers.

"I know the word of a man like me means nothing, so I will prove myself with my actions," Graham murmured against Hannibal's skin, causing gooseflesh to rise up Hannibal's arm.

"Get up," Hannibal ordered gruffly, extracting his hand to halt the tendrils of energy that were sparking up his arm from Graham's touch. "Give your report to Mr. Brown when it's ready. Our meeting is concluded," he stated brusquely, striding to the door and throwing it open, his gaze landing on his bodyguard. He could feel Graham hovering at his back, unsure and confused.

"Please show Mr. Graham out. He is to report to Mr. Brown in any future dealings." Hannibal didn't wait for either Katz's or Graham's reply before walking down the hall to his private study, pressing the hidden latch to open the door.

Once inside, Hannibal leaned against the door, his hand still gripping the doorknob. How had Graham ingrained himself so quickly on his psyche? Was he making a terrible mistake in trusting Graham? Would his Organization fall by this boy's hand?

Breathing deeply and calmly, Hannibal slowly regained control of his emotions. No, he trusted his instincts and Graham would be a good asset. Funneling all communications with Graham through Brown would alleviate any further compromises. Hannibal couldn't afford to let loose of his control for even a moment: the beast was always coiled and ready to strike.

He couldn't afford to let his true face be known.

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Alana Bloom was beautiful. Ruby red lips, dark hair, flirtatious smile, killer legs.

She was also surrounded by three men, sitting at the far end of the bar. She had shown no preference in their approaches to her: buying her a drink, striking up a serious conversation, or casually bumping into her as they sat down next to her. Her eyes didn't light up at any of

their conversations, her polite demeanor remaining steady through the past four evenings Will had observed her.

She was either the coolest woman Will had ever laid eyes on, or she had her own agenda to complete and was only using the men as a cover for her mission.

It's what Will would have done. It was what Will planned to do.

Dressed to match her casual upscale look, he sat a few chairs down from her with his back against the bar, sipping at his gin and tonic. His eyes constantly scanned the room, occasionally stopping for a few seconds before he would turn around and lean on the bar as if he was hiding his face from the crowd.

Women of all ages sidled up to him, the younger ones touching his arm or hand, the older ones leaning in, letting their breath tickle his ear as they whispered what they wanted to do to him. Three of the back room girls and one of the guys approached him, alluding to companionship in their practiced way. He shifted uneasily in his chair but gently let them all down, sending them away with an apologetic smile and flirtatious lowering of his eyelashes.

He downed the last of his drink and ordered a water in the same glass, hating the flush he could feel on his cheeks. He wanted to be *done* with this life, tired of peddling his looks to satisfy the constant hunger in his belly. Lecter hadn't given him any sort of allowance, so Will's alcohol consumption was coming out of his own very thin pocket. He didn't know how he was supposed to wine and dine Alana with the $3 he had left to his name.

He had to improvise. He had to be clever. He had to get her to seduce *him*. The irony wasn't lost on him: one last seduction to end his life of seduction. Lecter was a sick bastard in more ways than one.

Thinking of Lecter made his pulse speed up and sweat to form in his palms.

"Hi," a sultry feminine voice said to his left.

He jumped, completely oblivious to Alana's approach. He blinked at her and his gaze slid to the seat she had occupied throughout the night, confirming it was empty. "Uh, hi," he stammered. His smile felt forced and he let it drop away, terrified that he'd botched it up. Lecter would dismiss him and he'd be forced to go to Harris or Dolarhyde, or one of the other lesser Families and beg them to take him in.

Alana's perfume grew stronger as she leaned against his arm, her lips brushing his ear as she murmured, "You okay, honey? You look hunted."

His hand tightened on his glass and he licked his lips nervously. "I'm fine. Good." He offered a wan smile but refused to turn his head to look at her. "You shouldn't be here."

He felt her shift next to him, sitting on the seat facing the room and resting her hand on his arm. "In Lecter's club or next to you?"

He raised his glass to his lips, barely moving them as he hissed, “Either.” After a long swallow that he was glad was water, he added, “You’re Tier’s gal.”

He could feel her displeasure at the name. “I’m nobody’s *gal*. He and I have some good times, but until there’s a rock on my finger, I don’t belong to anybody.”

Some of Will’s nerves faded as he chanced a sidelong look at her. “That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“Bastard,” was muttered under her breath as she gulped a mouthful of her Orange Blossom. “I can’t get away from him even in *here*.”

Will’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “You being threatened by him?” he asked under his breath.

She shook her head and sighed. “I like him well enough, but he’s got other interests that are more important than me. I guess I’ve been feeling underappreciated.”

Will looked down at the ice left in his glass and murmured, “I wouldn’t let anything be more important than you.” At her abrupt peal of laughter, he ducked his head, turning it slightly away from her.

“I’m sorry. Hey,” the hand lightly squeezing his arm abandoned it to cradle his cheek, gently turning his head until he faced her. “I didn’t mean to laugh. I’ve put up with a lot of chat up lines the last few weeks and that was one of the corniest, but you meant it, didn’t you?”

Ears warm, he could only nod, not trusting his voice to remain steady if he spoke.

Her fingers lightly stroked along his jaw, trailing over his lips and down his chin. He leaned into her touch, his eyes half-closing. Low and intimate, her voice felt like another caress. “I don’t know how to tell the sincere guys from the jerks. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t need to be sorry,” he managed to get out without sounding like a helpless lovestruck teenager. “You’re beautiful. Everyone wants to be seen with you.”

The flirtatious note in her voice sent his hormones into meltdown. “Do you want to be seen with me?”

Breathing heavily, he swallowed the last of his drink. “I can’t,” he murmured and slid off the chair, fumbling out two quarters and tossing them on the bar.

He made his way through the crowd to the exit, taking in the clear air in huge gulps. His eyes smarted from all the cigarette smoke and he pressed the heel of his hands into his eyes, silently counting to himself.

A hand on his arm had him backing up and raising his fist before he focused on Alana’s shocked expression. “I’m so sorry,” he gushed, raising a trembling hand to her face and then snatching it back as if he’d been burned. “I thought…”

“Not here.” Her demand was firm; uncompromising, and he followed her into a taxi and kept his mouth shut for the duration of the drive.

At what he guessed was her place from the décor, she again took charge, unbuttoning his jacket and tossing it toward the couch.

As he had learned from Phyllis all those years ago, he gave himself over to Alana, opening himself to whatever she needed to take from him. After she had spent herself on him, he slid down the bed and teased her with fingers and mouth, relishing the pain of his hair being pulled and his head crushed between her thighs. She really was a beautiful woman, wild when she was unleashed from the confines of her societal status.

It wasn't until they were quietly catching their breath that she thought to ask for his name. He gave it to her without hesitation, the only honest thing he could give her in their twisted fling.

The three weeks he spent with her went by quickly. At the end of their second week together, he learned what Lecter needed to know. Of secondary concern was the quality of Lecter's drinks: how watered down they were compared to the price. But what Tier, or rather Hobbs was after, was Lady Margot, the singer Lecter hired on months ago who was drawing big crowds. Will had watched Alana meet with her twice after a set, Margot clearly not interested in whatever pitch Alana was relaying from Hobbs.

He could have ended it with Alana then, but he was unwilling to fuck her and abandon her without his mark imprinted on her.

Their last night together, he refused to listen to her pleas to stop, playing her thrashing, sweat-slicked body with every trick he could recall until she was hyper-sensitive and half-asleep. His sucking bruises ran along her clavicle, circled her breasts, dotted the inside of her thighs, but the one on her right ass cheek had bloomed hot and forbidden in his mouth. He bit gently at her skin until she squirmed and moaned, fingers tightening in his hair as she pulled him closer.

His chest was a collection of bruises and bite marks, little half-moon cuts from her fingernails spread across his shoulders, back and ass. Tier was a fool for not making an honest woman of her, as Will conveniently ignored how he had slept with her for nearly a month with no intention of continuing their acquaintance.

He dressed quietly in the early dawn, brushing back her hair to press a kiss to her forehead. "I'm sorry," he mouthed, barely making a sound as he slipped out of her apartment.

He had never felt as dirty as he did walking away from her, but he had completed his mission for Lecter and that's what he focused on.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Alana's boyfriend exacts revenge on Will after their break-up. Hannibal lets him recover at Lecter House.

Tags for this chapter: Cannibalism, Hurt Will Graham, Will Graham Helps Himself, Dark Will Graham.

Will’s heart tripped against his ribcage; a wild, fluttery thing wanting to take flight. It was as unexpected as waking up in an unfamiliar bed to Don Lecter sitting by his bedside.

As much as he admired and respected the man; as much as he feared him, Will was not so brazen to think he would ever draw the interest of a man like Don Lecter. No matter what his instincts were screaming at him, Lecter was only protecting his investment.

That’s what Will repeated to himself as Lecter brushed by him on his way out of the library, trying to convince himself that he didn’t hear the quiet inhale of Lecter smelling him as he passed by.

The knock to Hannibal's door sounded urgent and the door opened before he could call out.

Mr. Zeller remained in the doorway but pitched his voice low. "Mr. Lecter, forgive the intrusion, but it's Graham. Brown just brought him in."

Why Graham couldn't have made it to the house under his own power caused unwanted emotions to stir inside Hannibal, quickly brushed aside as he followed Zeller to a spare bedroom. The smell of blood hit Hannibal before he entered the room, his eyes taking in everything before he spoke.

“Mr. Zeller, please inform Dr. Chilton that I am in need of his services,” he murmured, stepping closer to Graham sprawled out on the bed. What once had been a decent suit was now nothing more than rags, muddy and blood-stained and torn at the seams. Mud was caked to Graham’s face, streaked through with drying blood. The knuckles on both hands were bruised and raw; Graham had put up a hell of fight. Hannibal’s gaze drifted lower; Graham’s trousers were twisted on his hips as if…

“I want the knowledge of Graham’s presence here minimized,” Hannibal ordered. “Inform everyone who saw you,” he half-turned to Brown, who nodded and left the room swiftly, closing the door behind him.

Hannibal pulled up a chair to better inspect his newest recruit. Not only were Graham’s knuckles bruised, but in looking closer, Hannibal could see scrapes on his palms and stomach where Graham’s shirt had been ripped. Blood matted the right side of his head and Hannibal could just make out scrapes along the back of Graham’s jaw. His left eye was swollen shut and his lips were split and bloody.

A deep, pained groan signaled Graham’s return to consciousness. Graham curled a hand around his torso in a futile attempt to either protect himself or ease the pain.

“Please refrain from moving until the doctor arrives,” Hannibal said in a calming voice, but Graham’s body jerked away from the sound and a hiss of pain ended with a wet-sounding cough.

Hannibal waited patiently until Graham settled, then said in the same calm voice, “You are at Lecter House. Mr. Brown brought you in. I need to know what happened, Mr. Graham.”

Labored breathing that could have been from broken ribs or mounting panic echoed loudly in the room. Graham’s head was turned away from him and remained there as he rasped, “Got jumped.”

Hannibal counted out the seconds waiting for Graham to say more, but the stubborn man remained silent. “I know what retribution looks like, Mr. Graham. Would you care to revise your story?”

The rattled exhale sent Graham into a coughing fit. Graham breathed heavily for a moment before admitting, “I ended it with Alana yesterday. Tier didn’t take kindly to having his property marked by someone else. He and Stammets wanted to make an example of me. Hauled me into an alley and used me as a punching bag.”

Hannibal studied the defiant young man, letting his gaze travel down the tattered wool to stare pointedly at the awkward twist of his bloody trousers, noting several zipper teeth were just as twisted. When Graham’s discomfort became tangible but he still remained silent, Hannibal prompted, “Is that all they used you for?”

“*They didn’t touch me!*” Graham snarled viciously, sending Hannibal what should have been a heated glare, but with one eye swollen shut, it fell short of its intention. “You think I’m some weak little boy unable to take care of myself? I cut Tier when he tried to hold my arms

and Stammets—" Graham clamped his mouth shut and turned away as much as he could, breathing out a poorly muffled groan for his trouble.

Silence other than Graham's noticeable breathing descended once again and Hannibal's patience was beginning to run thin. "What happened to Mr. Stammets, Will?" he asked, hoping the use of Graham's first name would trigger an emotional connection to draw him out.

Seconds ticked by, then a flat, dull tone uttered what Hannibal had already suspected: "Dead."

Hannibal knew they had a precious hour, maybe two before the nightly patrol stumbled over the body. While the local police were paid well to keep silent, Hannibal couldn't chance that Crawford and the FBI wouldn't stick their noses in it. "Where is the body?"

Now that Graham had admitted to killing Stammets, he seemed less hesitant to talk. "Shoved behind the boxes in the alley."

"I'll send someone to take care of it," Hannibal assured him, though Graham didn't seem to need assurance. The vitriol in Graham's voice and his demeanor was not that of a victim, but of an instinctive, justifiable reaction.

Hannibal's review of *The Boxcar*'s records had provided information about the death of one Charlie Fabrite and the disappearance of one Graham Willis the same night about three years ago. There was no doubt in Hannibal's mind that Graham had switched up his name, but he wanted to hear it from Graham's lips. "Has this happened before?"

"Being beaten up in an alley? Happens about once a month," Graham sniped, though they both knew Graham understood Hannibal's question. Graham's voice was barely above a whisper as he confessed, "Chesapeake City. Guy argued my mouth wasn't what he paid for and started roughing me up. I had a knife in my mattress. When he pinned me, I stuck it in his neck and ran."

Hannibal hid his pleased smile. His instincts had been correct. The coy, shallow boy was only a protective front for Graham's true nature: a lion wrapped up in a helpless lamb skin.

A soft rap on the door dragged Hannibal away from his fantastical reverie. With one last glance at Graham, he opened the door and slipped outside.

"Dr. Chilton," Hannibal greeted him with a firm handshake. "Thank you for coming. Your patient is just inside." Hannibal placed his hand on Chilton's shoulder, leaning in close to murmur, "Discreetly check for undisclosed injuries and report to me alone."

Chilton nodded and entered the room, shutting the door to give his patient privacy.

Hannibal indicated Brown should follow him, drawing him away from the door so their conversation wouldn't be overheard by its occupants. "Please outline exactly how you came to find Mr. Graham."

Brown's eyes flashed angrily. "I'd been keeping an eye on Will since he got with Alana Bloom. I noticed he wasn't going home some nights, holing up in a back booth at the *Silver Diner* nursing a water until midnight, then he'd slip upstairs. Will's renting a room in this guy's place, so whenever the guy is entertaining, he tells Will to stay out until midnight. I don't interfere; just keep an eye on him, you know?"

Filing away the interesting tidbit of Brown's use of Graham's first name, Hannibal nodded to indicate Brown should continue.

"I left the *Blue Diamond* at eight and went past the diner, but Will wasn't there. Figuring he was home, I started down 6th and saw a guy doubled over, holding himself up against the building. I went over to help and saw it was Will." Brown's disgust was palpable, a sneer twisting his features into something ugly and dark. "He mumbled something about tears and passed out. I brought him straight here."

"He was speaking of Randall Tier," Hannibal corrected him quietly, his thoughts spreading in several different directions at once. "Take one of the cleaning crew and sweep the alley. Mr. Graham has informed me he left Mr. Stammets' body behind some boxes. Search for a blade of some kind."

"Two against one? Over a *canary*?" Brown grumbled and Hannibal had to concur with Brown's displeasure.

Brown turned on his heel and began walking down the hallway, but turned back with an utterly blank expression. "What do you want me to do with the body, Mr. Lecter?"

Hannibal kept the dark pleasure out of his expression as he ordered softly, "Bring it to the back of the house."

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Stammets had been exactly where Graham had indicated, knife wounds to his hands, abdomen and lower back suggesting just how close Stammets had been to Graham. Whether that had been Graham's plan in order to kill him or a desperate act of self-preservation, Hannibal intended to find out through subtle questioning.

Graham's pocket knife had been recovered from a puddle tinted red with blood and Hannibal had been assured the area had been checked for any additional evidence. The only thing remaining was Stammets' body, now residing in the old lean-to at the back of Lecter house.

Hannibal had changed into his work clothes and tied on his butcher's apron in preparation for dismembering the body. It had been placed on the embalming table, the washtub beneath the table already catching fluids that dripped into it. The lean-to was cool from the night air but Hannibal was too engrossed in studying the wounds Graham had inflicted to notice, fingers trailing over bruised and split skin. Graham had damaged the organs too much to use but plenty of other cuts remained viable.

Hannibal coaxed a fire to life in the old wood-burning stove, opening the doors wide in order to dispose of the waste. He set to work butchering, placing selected cuts of meat on a platter.

Once he'd gotten what he needed, he broke down the rest of the body, sawing through bone with care.

The scent of cooking meat made his mouth water, but he finished his task before stoking the fire for the night. He scrubbed down the table and emptied the washtub, hanging up his apron before picking up Graham's knife with care. It was older, the bone handle worn smooth with time and use. Dried blood flaked off as he opened the blade, admiring the sharpness of the edge. He used a small, soft brush to clean the knife thoroughly, knowing that Graham would want it back. After scrubbing his hands and arms, he dried the knife and slipped it into his pocket.

Tired but exhilarated, Hannibal carried the platter of meat into the kitchen. It was going on midnight, but he set to work crafting a stew. Meat, potatoes and vegetables chopped fine as Graham wouldn't be able to chew without pain, seasoning and tomatoes joining the large stew pot before Hannibal covered it and set it to simmer overnight.

Zeller knocked on the door just as he was putting the leftover meat into the refrigerator. "The doc's ready for you, Mr. Lecter."

No broken bones but plenty of bruised ones, including a mild concussion. Hannibal listened to Dr. Chilton's instructions on Graham's care as well as the brief description of what appeared to be sexual marks on Graham's chest and back, but no other indications of assault. He thanked Dr. Chilton, paid him and escorted him to the door.

Hannibal went upstairs to check on his unexpected guest and found Graham asleep, worry lines etched across his forehead. Dr. Chilton had clipped Graham's hair in order to sew up the cut on his scalp, the uneven haircut giving him a wild look. Knuckles bandaged and gauze wrapped around the palms of his hands, the stark white blended into the sheets bunched up around Graham's chest.

Until that moment, Hannibal hadn't consciously thought of what to do with Graham. Staring at the unbroken spirit in the battered body, the decision for Graham to stay at the House during his recovery seemed obvious.

Hannibal spied Graham's ruined suit crumpled on the floor and pledged to send Brown to Graham's house in the morning to retrieve some clothes and personal effects. With an irritated huff, Hannibal scooped the suit up, emptied everything from all the pockets onto the nightstand and threw the rags into the trash can.

He withdrew Graham's knife from his pocket and placed it on top of the leather wallet, where Graham would be sure to see it.

Sparing one last look at the sleeping man, Hannibal shut the door and asked Katz to guard it, ensuring no one would enter—or exit—the room before morning.

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Grumblings about Frankenstein's monster reached Hannibal's ears whenever he walked by the room, positive that Graham could identify him by his stride and raised his voice just

enough to be heard through the door.

A small part of Hannibal found it endearing.

What he did not find endearing was the thin form that was uncovered after Graham had bathed. Removing the dirt and blood revealed a lean body and concave stomach. Hannibal wondered just how often Graham had gone hungry rather than return to the back rooms or swindle another widow. Graham's words echoed back at him: *I want the security of a bed and food without having to find my next mark.*

Graham was protesting being held captive when Hannibal visited him with a bowl of the stew and a glass of water, pleased to see the fire was still in Graham.

"You're not a prisoner, Mr. Graham," Hannibal assured him smoothly, setting down the tray with the food he'd prepared. "I asked Miss Katz to ensure your safety, which includes keeping you from doing further damage to your body. Need I remind you that you have a concussion and should not be up and about?"

Grumbling under his breath and glaring as menacingly as he could with one eye, Graham attempted to feed himself with the spoon, but his hand was unsteady and the gauze cumbersome. Hannibal watched in faint amusement as Graham contemplated the problem.

"Sorry," Graham muttered before cradling the bowl in his bandaged hands and bringing it to his lips. Hannibal gaped as Graham tipped the bowl to get a mouthful of stew, ignoring the liquid that dribbled down his chin. Graham proceeded to finish the bowl and wiped his chin with the back of his hand, staining the gauze. He picked up the water glass the same way and drained it, though at least that all went into his mouth.

Appalled at Graham's manners, Hannibal stopped himself several times from offering to help, positive that any such attempt would be met with scorn and insistences that Graham could feed himself. Graham had been self-sufficient for too long and any help that he had been offered in the past had no doubt come with a price.

As if Graham was reading his mind, Graham looked down at the tray and suddenly appeared much younger, exuding vulnerability. "Thank you for returning my dad's knife, Don Lecter," he said, his meek tone matching his demeanor. "And for the doctoring and food. If you can wait until I'm feeling better, I'll be happy to repay you then."

Hannibal studied Graham's attitude change with fascination, bordering on awe. This persona was provocative yet designed to invoke protection, and Hannibal was ashamed to admit he was almost swayed. Almost. With a slight edge to his voice, he asked, "Why do you think I helped you?"

The vulnerability fell away, Graham now looking a mix of forlorn and irritated, with a tone to match. "You don't want my mess coming back to the Family. Patching me up makes me grateful and indebted to you so I won't talk."

Always the wary con man; Hannibal could hardly fault Graham. "'Your mess', as you so eloquently put it, has been contained. It's no longer a concern for you or the Family." Seeing

Graham's troubled frown, Hannibal elaborated, "The alley is clean of any evidence. If any should materialize, it will be your word against Mr. Tier, though I doubt he ever speaks of it. One does not like admitting they were bested by someone younger and more ferocious, especially if they brought two men to the fight and only one made it home."

Graham remained quiet, gaze fixed firmly on the sheets before asking, "Why?" the question so loaded with meaning it took Hannibal a moment to sift through its many conjectures.

"You became a member of the Lecter Family when I allowed you to show your respect to me. I don't grant that privilege to those outside the Family." He gave Graham a few minutes to process that information, telling himself Graham's suspiciously bright eyes were from the pain medication wearing off.

He hid his pleased smile as he watched the transformation of the young, distrustful boy into a still hesitant, but much more confident man. "How do you know I was ferocious?" Graham asked.

Hannibal watched for Graham's reactions carefully as he stated, "I saw Stammets' body."

The bruising and cuts stood out more starkly as Graham's face paled, fear of what he had been driven to do contrasting with the suggestion of pride at the slight uplift of his chin. "Can I…see it?" Graham asked hesitantly, eyes downcast as though he were ashamed of the request.

"I regret that the body has been disposed of," Hannibal replied, finding he was rather disappointed. Would Graham's eyes have lit with satisfaction at seeing his handiwork or would he have mourned the loss of life?

Apprehension shadowed Graham's confidence. "It's not possible to completely dispose of a body. There's always trace evidence."

"Are you quite certain of that?" Hannibal answered with the softest of teasing in his voice, adding a knowing smile to his reveal.

Graham searched his face, then his eyes lost focus, his lips parting slightly as his breathing slowed.

Hannibal moved his hand through Graham's line of sight but Graham didn't follow its movements; it was if his mind had gone on a journey without his body. Curiosity burned through Hannibal, wondering what it was that Graham was seeing and how he was able to achieve such a state without any sort of preparation.

Hannibal's patience was rewarded when Graham returned from wherever his mind had taken him and his gaze went immediately to the empty bowl, his expression transforming swiftly from perplexed to comprehension. A thick swallow confirmed that Graham had worked out what had happened to at least some of Stammets' body. A few more hard swallows as if Graham were trying to keep his meal down, then he asked quietly, "Do the others know?"

“I have entrusted a few with the knowledge of my proclivities.” Seeing the haunted look in Graham’s eyes, Hannibal decided to test his loyalty. “I am neither proud nor ashamed of my actions; they simply are. If you find you cannot reconcile that, then I’ll ask that you leave the premises and end your relationship with my House.”

“No!” Graham snapped, then lowered his voice, some of the panic fading from his expression. “That’s not what…why trust me?”

Hannibal stared pointedly at the empty bowl then met Graham’s searching gaze. “You already knew,” he retorted, wanting to see how Graham would react.

An immediate flash of indignation, followed by another thick swallow as Graham realized that he’d been complicit in Hannibal’s proclivities, however unintentional. After a minute of contemplation, Graham gave a slow nod, rubbing a hand over his cheek. “And you had the doctor check if I’d been fucked,” he stated, confident in his query.

Hannibal canted his head in assent. “Your inner strength is staggering, but there will always be a piece of you that you hide away from the world. We all do it,” he shrugged minutely. “You tuck your pain in deep and let it drive you. I wouldn’t want shame tainting your future actions.”

“I felt no shame in luring Stammets in closer,” Graham stated calmly, easily meeting Hannibal’s gaze. “I let him believe that he had the upper hand, then let him pin me to the ground before I sank my knife into his thigh. It was easy to subdue him after I’d gotten a few good jabs in. That *is* what you wanted to know, isn’t it?” Graham asked, a knowing smirk distorted by his bruised lips.

Dangerous. Fearless. *Marvelous*. Hannibal curtailed his sense of pride at Graham’s correct supposition, stifling the desire to smile at him. “Am I to believe Miss Bloom is not the lady that society believes her to be?” he countered instead, letting his gaze linger on the bite marks decorating Graham’s chest.

Color returned to Graham’s skin in a rush, but he held Hannibal’s gaze as he replied, “It took someone willing to look beneath the surface beauty to see the true worth beneath.”

“Being seen for who you are can be quite powerful. It is a rare gift,” Hannibal mused, easing himself out of the chair. He kept his eyes on Graham as he buttoned his jacket, their silent communication conveying understanding and mutual respect, and from Graham, gratitude. “Mr. Brown will be along later this afternoon with effects from your room, though you are welcome to stay as long as you like. When you are well enough, a trip to my barber is in order. You look like you just escaped from the asylum.”

Chuckling punctuated by groans of pain followed Hannibal from the room.

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Will didn’t mind the odd jobs he was assigned. He knew it was a way to ease him into the flow of the Business and he did them all with a smile and polite conversation. His flashier suits were pushed to the back of his armoire, wearing more traditional suits when he

accompanied the wives and girlfriends shopping—partially to keep them company, but mostly to keep an eye on their surroundings.

Will was unknown in Family circles and the longer they could delay his association with the Lecter Family, the more information he could gather without being noticed. He gave detailed reports to Matthew after every excursion, listing names he knew and describing faces he didn't. He was uncomfortable with the praise Matthew heaped on him, offering a mumbled 'thanks' and changing the subject to Matthew's plans for the evening.

Will had become friendly with Matthew, Beverly and Jimmy Price, often joining them for poker or corralling one of them for a game of chess. Jimmy was okay for a fun game but Will preferred to play against Beverly. They were evenly matched and one would often have to laughingly concede defeat or the game would linger well into the night.

Will ran a hand through his hair, pausing again at the new, shorter cut. It was odd to not feel curls wrap around his fingers or the weight of long hair he used to carry. Whenever he passed the mirror in his room, he had to stop and blink at his reflection. It was almost a stranger staring back: shorter, trimmed hair made his jaw more pronounced and gave the appearance of him being older without any effort on his part.

Lecter had put him on the payroll and he mostly bought food, having plenty of clothes to blend in to whatever scenario Lecter set to him. His face and belly slowly rounded out, no longer feeling the cramps of hunger.

Because his belly was full, Will didn't have to go out to chase his next mark and found he was content to stay at home and read. As he had done during his recovery, Will borrowed books from the Lecter library any chance he got. Lecter encouraged him once he saw Will covertly reading *Ulysses*, declaring that stimulation of the mind was important to overall health.

Will was crouched on the floor in the library, scanning the spines on the lowest shelf when he heard the door open. He retreated deep into the shadows as Lecter and Beverly walked in, Beverly exuding concern and Lecter as unreadable as always.

"I've answered the questions I'm comfortable answering," Beverly began as they walked to the other end of the library toward Lecter's desk. "He's insatiably curious, wanting to know details of the Business even I'm not privy to."

"A healthy curiosity is neither good nor bad," Lecter assured her as he sat down, the slightest hesitation causing Will to push back further into the shadows, certain Lecter knew he was in the room. "However, I'd say Mr. Graham's unique position would put them at even strength."

Beverly sank into the chair, clearly confused. "What position? He's a member of the Family, isn't he?"

"He is," Lecter replied, "But rather than coming to us at a young boy, he is a young man with a full life already lived. He's only a few months into his training and naturally wants to learn as much as possible. With learning comes wisdom in knowing what is appropriate to ask."

Beverly made an inelegant sound that was suspiciously close to a snort, nearly sending Will into a fit of laughter. “He knows *exactly* what he’s asking is off limits, but it doesn’t stop him asking. He likes to try to catch me off my guard, hoping I’ll let something slip. It’s like a verbal game of chess, always trying to think a move ahead.”

“I thought you enjoyed chess with Mr. Graham,” Lecter teased mildly, Beverly repeating the inelegant sound and Will hiding his smile behind his hand.

“Only the kind played on an actual chess board.” Beverly’s slight tease shocked Will; he didn’t think anyone was permitted to joke with the Don.

Will heard the slight sigh before Lecter’s agreement. “I will speak with him about his inappropriate questions.”

Beverly’s relief was palpable in the large room. “Thank you, Mr. Lecter.”

The door closed behind her but Will remained where he was, feeling Lecter’s presence grow larger in the room.

“Have you enjoyed your games of chess with Miss Katz, Mr. Graham?” Lecter asked as he leaned back in his chair and fixed his gaze on the shadows where Will was hiding.

Throwing his shoulders back, Will stepped up to the desk clutching the copy of *Reconstruction in Philosophy* he’d selected. “We’re evenly matched so it presents a much more invigorating challenge for me,” he said, adding before his courage left him, “She’s mentioned how well you play. I would love to test my skill against yours.”

He had caught Lecter off-guard, though only the slight tightening of his fingers alluded to that fact. It was the change in the air, the subtle shift of *something* between them that set Will on edge, wondering if he’d overstepped an invisible boundary.

“Wednesdays,” Lecter said after a moment, leaving Will to sweat under his steely gaze until he chose to elaborate. “Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays are reserved for personal appearances at gallery openings, the theater and parties. Sundays are for collecting the weekly income and recording it in the books. Mondays are for reconciling the books with the bank deposits and along with Tuesdays, taking care of any business that wasn’t an emergency during the week.”

The leather chair creaked as Lecter leaned forward, his gaze dragging down Will’s body feeling like a caress. “Wednesdays are my personal time and I’m willing to grant you an hour at mid-morning to play chess and further your education about the Business.”

Will’s heart tripped against his ribcage; a wild, fluttery thing wanting to take flight. It was as unexpected as waking up in an unfamiliar bed to Don Lecter sitting by his bedside. He knew that Lecter valued intelligent people who could think for themselves.

As much as he admired and respected the man; as much as he feared him, Will was not so brazen to think he would ever draw the interest of a man like Don Lecter. No matter what his instincts were screaming at him, Lecter was only protecting his investment.

That's what Will repeated to himself as Lecter brushed by him on his way out of the library, trying to convince himself that he didn't hear the quiet inhale of Lecter smelling him as he passed by.

It was a long moment before Will felt steady enough to leave the library, unsure of what had just changed between himself and Don Lecter.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal's conversations with Will reveal more of Will's backstory. And, finally, they do more than talk.
>
> Tags for this chapter: First Kiss

Chess with Graham proved invigorating, but what nourished Hannibal more were their discussions. So much lay underneath their words that it was as though two or three conversations were happening at once. He had just outlined the operations of his casinos when he lobbed a soft question about Graham's clients, interested to see where the conversation would lead.

"Women were easy," Graham answered, moving his pawn. "They wanted to dress me up, fawn over me, make me into their ideal man. Most often because they wanted companionship, but sometimes to make a boyfriend or husband jealous. I was very careful with the married ones. I didn't want to end up gutted in some back alley."

Hannibal wasted no time in moving his knight. "Were the men as easy to please?" He detected a very slight shiver passing through Graham.

“No,” Graham answered dryly as he intently studied the board. “After my time in Chesapeake City, I was very selective about taking on men as clients. Even then, they often proved too possessive and demanding, assuming everything was allowed despite my strict rules that they’d agreed to. Those who couldn’t understand that they weren’t paying to have their way with me, were sent packing with a bloody nose or bruised cojones.” Graham’s fingers hesitated over a rook before he moved it.

Hannibal glanced over the board and saw his next five moves, but lingered over making his selection. He was more intent on Graham, eyes on the board but focused inward. “One got to you,” Hannibal prodded softly as he moved his pawn. He caught the flash of surprise before Graham wiped it away, and offered an understanding smile. “It isn’t so difficult to imagine. You adored the women, you liked the men who treated you with respect, but there is almost always one who worms their way under your skin.”

Graham was silent for a long time, eyes unfocused and breathing uneven. “Antony,” he answered thickly. “Eighteen and home on break from his first semester at college. Terrified of what he was learning about himself. Needed my help to understand and accept his new desires. I wasn’t much older than him.”

“Were you terrified of learning about yourself at such a young age?” Hannibal guided him gently, tasting reluctance at this line of questioning.

Graham roused himself, losing the softness memories had given his features as he picked up his queen. “What I did to survive had little to do with my personal preferences.”

Hannibal realized Graham’s move too late and searched the board for a different strategy. “What are your personal preferences?”

“My own,” Graham deflected and took Hannibal’s rook. “Check.”

Annoyance and reluctant admiration forced Hannibal’s mind back to the game. “I have found little need for sexual companionship,” he tossed out haphazardly, hoping to distract Graham from his next move.

Both his plays were called without hesitation. “The rumors aren’t that far off, then. The theory is that you choose no sexual companions to ensure that you can never be blackmailed,” Graham replied confidently as he moved his queen. “Check.”

A hum of discontent burrowed itself beneath Hannibal’s skin at being backed into a corner. “I would hope that the rumors aren’t being spread by my own Organization,” he replied lightly, knowing at least a few of them originated from his very House. He was curious to see if Graham would leap to his Family’s defense or expose the tattler.

Graham met his gaze steadily, blue-gray eyes calm with a hint of amusement. “Your special proclivities have overshadowed any concerns about whom you do or do not take to bed, Don Lecter.” Graham words were almost a tease, warmth settling in Hannibal’s chest unexpectedly at the ease that Graham displayed around him.

“Please call me Mr. Lecter,” Hannibal urged, moving to protect his bishop. “I buried that antiquated title with my father.”

His mentioning of his father disquieted Graham; it was in his sudden unease, rolling a captured pawn between his fingers and eyes fixated on the board. “If that’s what you prefer,” Graham acquiesced.

Hannibal didn’t feel the expected victory of having flustered Graham. Instead, the warmth intensified until Hannibal recognized it as kinship. Affinity for this con man plucked from the street; an amalgam of contradictions wrapped in a pretty package outshined by his quick mind. “I wished to disassociate myself from my father’s legacy,” Hannibal explained, watching as Graham scrambled to protect his knight. “Part of that was removing arcane practices and notions.”

“I find myself trying to emulate my father,” Graham admitted and Hannibal stilled, afraid to draw Graham’s attention away from speaking of his father. Hannibal had managed to reluctantly pull a few tidbits from Graham, but never had Graham offered without coercion. “He was a store clerk. I’d have supper on the table when he got home. He always had a smile and stories for me, but only enough money for food and rent. When he died, I lost everything.” Haunted eyes met Hannibal’s. “I had to sell his watch to make the rent those first few months. The only things I have left of him are memories and his pocket knife.”

Hannibal gave the memory a respectful silence before noting, “Memories can be powerful motivators.”

“‘Do whatever it takes to survive,’” Graham quoted, eyes sweeping the board. “Your move.”

Hannibal ignored the board, focusing on the young man across from him. He knew it was foolhardy to put so much trust in someone whose life contained so much drama, but his instincts were rarely wrong. His desire for physical gratification had been woken from its long slumber, driven by Graham’s mind and spirit, though Hannibal would be blind not to notice the man’s sensual beauty.

And that was only a fraction of what made Graham dangerous. Hannibal’s lips curled in a calculating smile as he ordered, “Sunday morning at nine I want you in this room. You are to observe everyone who enters and report on any discrepancies you notice, no matter how small.”

Graham’s eyes widened, surprise and anxiety turning them a dark green. “Of course, Mr. Lecter,” he agreed amicably. “Anything you need.”

Hannibal studied Graham until the young man looked away, the flush of pride at having been given a new job to perform sweeping along his neck. Hannibal traced the color up to Graham’s ear as he idly envisioned calling out Graham on his flippant agreements to ‘anything’; it was a lesson he greatly looked forward to. Keeping his pleased smile to himself, Hannibal moved his rook and declared, “Checkmate.”

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Identifying the ones who were skimming money from Lecter was easy for Will: the damp hair at the back of their neck, the twitch of their fingers as Smitty counted the money and checked the sum against the books, the nervous eye-shifting around the room while they waited for their receipt.

Will made note of those faces but dismissed them as too easily found out. Lecter wouldn't have bothered with him for something as simple as stealing money.

Finally, about two hours in, all of Will's senses went on alert as Carlo Deogracias walked in, full of swagger and a hint of a sneer. Will's survival instincts had him pressing against the bookcase, unable to sink further into the shadows. Contempt dripped from every line in Deogracias' body as he greeted Lecter, dropping the money parcel onto the desk and shaking Lecter's hand.

Will remained tense throughout the rest of the morning, agitation leading to visible tremors in his hands by the time the last deposit had been made into Lecter's safe. He heard Lecter send Smitty away and flinched when Lecter suddenly appeared before him and touched his shoulder. "Mr. Graham?"

"Deogracias *despises* you," Will hissed, rubbing the back of his neck to stop the crawling feeling. "His disgust for you is palpable. Couldn't you *feel* it?" he despaired, suddenly needing to *move*, feeling caged in by Lecter's presence.

He slipped around Lecter and walked a few paces into the open space, turning to look back at Lecter. "He wants you dead." On Lecter's moue of offense, Will's eyes slipped closed, recalling the sour smell in the air from years of simmering hatred.

Will slowly opened his eyes, fear scratching its way up his spine. He focused inward as he recited, "He placed his books and money at the very edge of the desk, forcing you to lean forward to get them in a show of his dominance and your vulnerability. His jacket was unbuttoned. When he reached for his cigar, his fingers lingered over the handle of his gun. With one move, he could have put a bullet between your eyes. His mouth curved in satisfaction as he envisioned it."

Will's final word echoed in the quiet of the library, his gaze finally shifting to meet Lecter's cool and disbelieving stare.

"How can you know that from merely looking at the man?" Lecter questioned.

Will shook his head, as helpless now to answer as he had been when Crawford had demanded answers. "I interpreted the evidence," was all he could offer, knowing that it wasn't enough. "It's a lot of little, nearly unobservable things that taken separately, don't mean much. But I can pull them all together and see the bigger picture."

"What is the bigger picture?" Lecter's voice had a hard edge of frustration. "To kill me? To destroy my Business? When is this to happen? How? I expected answers from you, not speculation."

Will clenched his hands into impotent fists, desperately wanting to take out his frustration on *something*. “I can’t *give* you answers,” he protested, exasperation causing him to raise his voice and begin to pace. “I can only extrapolate from what I observe, and what I extrapolated from observing Deogracias is that he has no respect for you, only contempt. He could’ve been planning something for months or years. Maybe it’s all a fantasy to him, just a way to make his job easier. Maybe he’ll have an ambush waiting for you when you leave tonight. Maybe he poisoned the money…”

“Will.” Lecter’s voice was devoid of all emotion.

Lost in his imagination, Will snapped, “*What?*” as he turned around. A hand curving around the side of his neck held him immobile, the brush of Lecter’s thumb against his jaw a steadying, soothing rhythm.

The room stilled; even the dust motes hung suspended in the air, the only sound Will’s erratic breathing echoing oddly. Lecter’s hand was warm and solid, the heat searing Will’s skin. But it was ice, not fire, that glittered in Lecter’s eyes, chilling and dangerous and sinking into Will’s soul, stirring the desire he had so carefully kept locked up for years.

“Will.” Lecter’s voice was so much warmer when it said his name a second time, the careful mask slipping enough for Will to see reciprocal desire, small and hesitant but growing. “I’ve known of Deogracias’ hatred of me for some time. I need evidence before I can make a move against him. Without proof of a planned assassination or dealings to undermine my Business, my actions could be construed as self-serving, rather than self-defense.” Lecter’s gaze slid to Will’s mouth, hand tightening ever so slightly against his neck. “I was hoping you could provide that evidence.”

Will licked his dry lips, conscious of how Lecter’s eyes followed the movement and a flutter of nerves twisted in his stomach. “That’s not how it works,” he explained in hushed tones. “I wish it did. I wish I was able to give you want you need.”

The slightest hitch in Lecter’s breathing set Will’s blood racing, anticipation charging the air between them. “I believe you might be the first person I’ve met who can give me what I need,” Lecter murmured, easing Will closer, Will cautiously allowing himself to be pulled closer.

His chest ached and his lungs burned, though Will was barely breathing as their lips drew closer and closer together. “Mr. Lecter…” Will breathed on an exhale, dazed by the small smile that curved Lecter’s mouth, softening the harsh lines of his face.

“Hannibal,” Lecter corrected him and the vice around Will’s chest tightened further, making breathing that much more difficult.

“Hannibal.” Will tasted the name on his tongue, liking the way it felt between his teeth. “I haven’t done this in years,” he admitted, the ghost of Antony’s smile haunting him. The last man he had kissed; the last man he had wanted to.

The smile deepened, creasing the corners of Hannibal’s mouth and making laugh lines appear at the corners of his eyes. “You didn’t kiss Miss Bloom?”

Their lips were so close together, speaking caused air to glide over Will's lips. He was growing lightheaded with anticipation and nervousness, his eyes skittering from Hannibal's eyes to his mouth. "Kissing a man is different. Different expectations."

"I think you'll find kissing me differs from anyone else," Hannibal promised, ghosting his lips over Will's, coaxing a soft sound from deep in Will's chest.

Hannibal continued to tease him, drawing out the act with feather-light touches and barely-there pressure until Will whined in frustration, finding the courage to bring his hands up to rest lightly on Hannibal's waist.

He was rewarded at last: full pressure, lips gliding over lips, the teasing hint of tongue, the subtle rasp of clothing as arms slid around bodies.

Soft sounds of encouragement were passed back and forth between their mouths, the kiss quickly building from exploratory to passionate. *Want* rushed through Will, burning him from the inside, as terrifying as it was electrifying. Hannibal's fingers tangled in his hair, cupping the back of his head to angle it just where he wanted it. Will let himself be guided, too lost in sensation to care how it was being given, so long as he could drown in it.

He pressed himself closer, one hand around the back of Hannibal's neck, the other wrapped around Hannibal's waist, sucking lightly at Hannibal's top lip before bringing their mouths together again.

The slow, heated slide of Hannibal's hand down Will's spine encouraged his hips to shift against Hannibal's, the kiss naturally breaking on their soft grunts of pleasure. A breath, then a deepening of the kiss, tongues and a hint of teeth causing Will's body to break out in a sweat. He could feel matching heat radiating from Hannibal, in the inferno of his mouth, in the burning of his touch. From the hand resting at the top curve of Will's ass, simply holding him there, steady but insistent.

Will tried to ignore it, focusing more of his energy into undoing the perfect image that Hannibal presented: fingers mussing his hair, teeth dragging along his kiss-swollen lower lip, fingertips carefully slipping under the fine wool of Hannibal's suit jacket to map the contours of his chest.

Slowly, Will's rational mind overrode his baser instincts. He pulled away, breathing unsteady and lips tingling from Hannibal's sharp teeth. He gently pushed against Hannibal's chest when he tried to resume the kiss, leaning back when Hannibal persisted.

"Why now?" Will asked, fearful of the answer. So much would be determined by Hannibal's answer: if Will would agree to an affair with the Head of the Family; if Hannibal wanted more from him and he was unable to give it, whether Will would be able to stay with the Family if he refused.

The fevered look slowly bled from Hannibal's eyes to be replaced by concern. "Does the timing of my affection determine whether you return it?"

“Of course not,” Will replied hotly, forcing himself not to sway closer to Hannibal’s inviting mouth. “I’m simply trying to determine when it happened. I can’t imagine a few games of chess and a handful of conversations often lead to…this.”

Hannibal’s eyes glowed with affection, Will’s eyes half closing at the hand smoothing down his hair. “Your concern for me wasn’t rehearsed nor false. You honestly believed you were saving my life by pointing out Deogracias as a threat. But whose life were you saving? The Head of the Family or the man before you?”

Will had to concentrate on the question and formation of his answer. He replayed his arguments in his head, horrified at how he had spoken to the Head of the Family, but that hadn’t even occurred to him. He had only sensed a threat and wanted it eliminated. “You,” he answered honestly, studying Hannibal’s pleased expression. “The man.”

The crinkled-eyed smile set Will’s heart thumping wildly. “Since I first saw you, you have fascinated me,” Hannibal admitted. “You intrigue me. You are an enigma I would gladly spend the rest of my life trying to understand.”

Will knew he was gaping; he felt the slackness in his jaw, but he couldn’t wrap his mind around what Hannibal was telling him. He blurted out, “You barely know me,” but Hannibal merely smirked at him as if he knew a secret that Will did not.

“If I had proof that Deogracias was going to kill me and I put the two of you in a locked room together with one weapon, what would you do?”

The noise of displeasure that emanated from Will’s chest startled him, but seemed to delight Hannibal. “I—I’d want,” Will stammered, not knowing where the surge of anger and protectiveness came from. He took a deep breath and looked directly into Hannibal’s eyes. “I’d want to cut his heart out.”

The smile that bloomed over Hannibal’s features took Will’s breath away. “That is ‘why now.’ Anyone who has pledged themselves to my Family would defend me to the death, but you, Will,” Hannibal sighed, “You would destroy anyone who dared try to harm me and would enjoy making them suffer for it.”

The truth of the words hit Will hard, feeling like a physical blow. “Yes,” he hissed before grabbing Hannibal’s face and kissing him hard and deep, wanting to crawl inside the man and never see daylight again.

It was Hannibal’s turn to break the kiss, holding Will at arms’ length. “Let’s find the evidence so we can both get what we want.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Deogracias' plans are uncovered and there are more players involved than either Will or Hannibal suspected. Hannibal allows Will to exact revenge for the Family in order to test his chameleon's loyalty.

Tags for this chapter: Canon-Typical Violence, Blow Jobs, Bathing. There be porn here!

Hannibal knew it wouldn’t be as easy as turning Will onto Deogracias’ scent, but he had hoped for further progress after nearly two months.

He had also hoped for further developments in his pursuit of the young man, but Will was proving elusive on that front, devoting his extra time to uncovering Deogracias’ nefarious plan—if one existed. Hannibal was beginning to suspect Carlo was harboring fantasies and nothing more when a breathless, triumphant Will sat down across from him in his study.

“You look very pleased with yourself,” he observed, enjoying the rare bright, open smile.

“Matteo Deogracias met with Abigail Hobbs last night,” Will unveiled, his smile turning malicious. “Proof that Carlo is working with Hobbs’ Organization.”

“A meeting is hardly proof of ill intent,” Hannibal cautioned, though anytime associates from opposing Organizations met, it was suspicious.

Will removed an envelope from his jacket and tossed it onto the desk, narrowly missing the chess board. “Four thousand dollars says Matteo was setting up a hit on you with Garret Hobbs through his daughter.”

Hannibal touched the envelope with his fingertips, circling it around before thumbing it open and seeing the stack of 100s. “Four thousand isn’t enough to take out the Head of a Family,” he dismissed, his pride wounded that Will would think him worth so little.

Will’s smile didn’t falter as he leaned closer, elbows on his knees. “Carlo wouldn’t send his brother with the full amount. Installment payments over the course of months would build trust between Deogracias and Hobbs. It would show Garret that Carlo was serious. It’s also a small enough amount that it could go unnoticed by anyone who happened to be looking for suspicious activity.”

Hannibal leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, picturing the scenario. Four thousand every week or two for however many months Deogracias had been planning his assassination; it could possibly be enough. That Hobbs believed he could take on the Lecter Family was an entirely different problem that he hadn’t foreseen. Hannibal could feel his anger rising and cursed softly under his breath. “I need to bring this to the attention of the lieutenants.”

Hannibal didn’t think it possible, but Will’s smile widened and viciousness sparkled like diamonds in his eyes. “You should only need the word of one or two. I stole the money from Abigail’s purse before she left the bar last night. When her father doesn’t get his expected payment, someone will have to pay for it and Garret’s love for his daughter is well known.”

Hannibal caught on to Will’s train of thought, indignation cloying thick and vicious in his throat as Will enthused, “Hobbs will call on Carlo to answer for it, either in public where you can have a prominent Family member on hand as witness, or set a watch on Hobbs’ place and wait to see if Carlo shows up. Either way, it should be proof enough that Carlo is plotting with Hobbs against you.”

Will looked so proud for having uncovered Deogracias’ secret, but all Hannibal could see was the red haze of betrayal at two of his own who had pledged their lives to him. Once the lieutenants had confirmed their guilt, judgement would be quick and extremely painful. “Thank you, Will,” he dismissed in a clipped tone, his eyes on the envelope as he shuffled it in a semi-circle on the desk.

“But…I found your evidence,” Will stressed, his bewilderment offending Hannibal in its naiveté. “Aren’t you relieved?”

“*Relieved*?” Hannibal’s voice thundered throughout the room. In a rare display of anger, his hand slammed onto the desk, toppling chess pieces and sending some rolling onto the floor. “I have just discovered that not one, but *two* of my own have been plotting to kill me using one of my rivals. I now have to go to war against that insufferable Hobbs to put him in his place. What *relief* could I possibly find in that?” He shoved back from the desk and stalked around the room in an attempt to dispel his anger, belatedly registering Will silent and still in his chair.

Hannibal clutched at the ragged edges of his control, shoring up his tattered defenses. He released a breath, expelling more of his frustration and anger. It took another moment to center himself, sealing the beast back into its cage before he looked at Will's profile, head angled downward and partially turned away from him. "I don't normally lose my temper in such a disgraceful manner. My apologies."

Will's focus remained away from him as he said, "I offended you with my ignorance, not understanding the full impact of what my discovery meant. I humbly offer my apology for misspeaking, Don Lecter."

As Will looked up at him, Hannibal saw the riotous mix of desire, apprehension and awe in Will's eyes, eclipsed by the wide-blown pupils. Will's tone was reverent and low as he slowly pushed himself out of the chair. "You've always worn power like a cloak, not needing to raise your voice to command the respect most people dream of achieving."

As Will inched closer, Hannibal felt the beast slamming against the bars of its cage, demanding to claim the unpredictable, confident, *tempting* creature before him.

Gone was the hesitation of their first kiss as Will's hand slid up his chest, eyes drinking him in from toes to eyes, breathing harsh and uneven with arousal. "To shed your civility…to unleash just a fraction of that power…" Will's hungry gaze dropped to his mouth. "It was intoxicating. I want to taste it."

Hannibal felt the threads of his control fray and stretch taut, threatening to snap. He gripped the back of Will's head, enjoying the flash of defiance in the proud, lust-filled eyes. He held Will in place as their mouths clashed, brutal and unyielding, feeling the tug of Will's hands at his jacket.

Heeding the silent plea, Hannibal pressed them closer, anchoring his arm across the small of Will's back. An inhale, then Will sank deeper into the kiss, searching for that elusive taste of power.

Hannibal felt his hands clench tighter as he tried to hold on to his quickly slipping control. It was a new feeling, to want to lose himself in his partner, to forget who he was and take what was on offer. Always in sex he had been in control, calm, indulging only until his body's needs were satisfied.

Will made him want to lose control, indulge his desires until they were both dripping with exhaustion. He curved his hand around Will's hip, sliding his fingers down until he could dig his heel into muscle and flesh, squeezing a firm handful of Will's ass.

Will's hands were immediately at his belt, swiftly dropping to his knees and working the leather open. But rather than arousal, the unpleasant scents of trepidation, fear and guilt rose from his kneeling chameleon.

Not knowing why the abrupt change had taken place, Hannibal stilled Will's slightly trembling fingers with a light touch. "Will," he commanded softly, waiting for Will to look up at him.

“I’ve offended my Don,” came the whispered admission. “I insulted you.” When Will lifted his head, his expression was one of contrition and fear. “I have to make amends.”

If it was a manipulation, it was a damn good one. If it was what Will truly believed… Hannibal drew the backs of his fingers across Will’s smooth cheek, sliding behind Will’s head and tilting it back further until he could look Will directly in the eye. “I’ve put you in a unique position, one that I’ve not been in before.”

Will followed his thoughts as if he’d spoken them aloud. “You’ve never had sex with someone who works for you.”

Hannibal gave a light pull to the back of Will’s neck, urging him to his feet. Unsteadily, Will obeyed the unspoken request, never breaking eye contact. “You’re inexperienced,” Hannibal commented lightly, ignoring the flicker of indignation and disbelief that passed over Will’s features. “You weren’t brought up with the Family, learning the intricacies and politics. You’ve only had Crawford’s influence and crime scenes to guide your way before, and a brief few months inside. I don’t fault you your innocent enthusiasm.”

At *innocent*, Will’s eyebrows rose and Hannibal had no desire to hide his small, pleased smile, as the haunted look had vanished from Will’s face. “Even with experience, there can still be innocence. I wish you’d never lose it, but it’s the nature of our lives.” His fingers stroked over the warm skin beneath Will’s hair. “Remember this lesson and temper your future responses.”

The gratitude that shone from Will’s relieved expression nearly hid the lurking apprehension. Hannibal was pleased; he would not want Will to forget his place.

“I will, Don Lecter. Hannibal,” Will corrected as Hannibal squeezed his neck in warning.

Hannibal withdrew his touch and leveled his gaze at Will, carefully masking his emotions. “Take off your jacket,” he instructed calmly, steel beneath his words.

Just at the edge of his vision, he saw Will’s fingers twitch before obeying. The white shirt beneath was stretched over newly filled out muscle and fat, a welcome change from the too-lean form he’d been only a few months ago.

Hannibal plucked the jacket from the loose fingers, folded it and dropped it onto the floor between them. He hitched up his trouser legs and gracefully sank down to his knees, only then checking to see what effect his actions had provoked.

Shock and all-encompassing desire radiated from Will, who swallowed and gave a short shake of his head. “You can’t…you *shouldn’t*…kneel for anyone. *Ever*,” Will whispered. “A Don never shows weakness.”

“You think because I choose to kneel, I’m weak?” Hannibal challenged, a delighted thrill running through him as a flush colored Will’s face.

“No. Never,” he stuttered, clearly lost as to how he should participate in the game Hannibal was playing. His embarrassment was palpable, a soothing balm to Hannibal’s overwrought

emotions.

“Those who seek God kneel in supplication and reverence. Those who are about to be judged often kneel and pray before I end their life,” Hannibal said as he undid Will’s buckle and button, then lowered his zip. The heat emanating from beneath his hands was enticing. He spread his hands over Will’s abdomen, thumbs rubbing along the thick outline beneath his underwear. “Your punishment shall be to endure until I give you permission to come.”

The flush that had been coloring Will’s cheeks faded and his mouth set in a tight, firm line. He gave a short nod and closed his eyes, and Hannibal felt him disappearing inside, withdrawing from the emotions that had staggered them both.

It took a second too long for Hannibal to realize his error. Of course Will’s clients would have put him to a similar test, wanting to continue their pleasure to get their money’s worth, heedless of the man that serviced them. Hannibal had often tested his limits in a similar manner, but it was a choice he made, not one thrust upon him.

With one last drag over Will’s erection, Hannibal pulled together the zipper and redid the button. When he sensed he had Will’s full, confused attention, he offered a rueful smile to the baffled young man. “It seems even a Don is capable of misspeaking. I won’t have you relive your past.” He started to rise, but a firm hand on his shoulder stayed him.

Will’s eyes were dark with lust but his touch tender as he stroked fingers along Hannibal’s cheek, wonderment slowly encompassing his features. “For you, I would endure anything.”

Anything ripped through Hannibal like a shockwave. He grabbed Will’s hand in a punishing grip and threatened, “The next time you speak that word to me, I will take *everything*.”

Will returned his tight hold, though his voice shook as he replied, “I’ll take greater care with my words in the future.”

Silence befell them, but the air thickened, neither Will’s nor his arousal had faded. Hannibal loosened his hold on Will’s hand, leaning in to press his open mouth against the outline of Will’s erection. It pulsed warm and alive beneath him, the accompanying sharp inhale encouraging him.

Hannibal set about revealing Will fully, pushing trousers and underwear down to Will’s knees, running his hands up the strong thighs. The scents nearly overpowered him as he mouthed at the base of Will’s erection, taste buds exploding with new flavors. “Your punishment is to thoroughly give yourself over to pleasure,” Hannibal said into the crease of Will’s thigh, licking up the sweat that had started to gather there. “Lose yourself in sensation. Hold nothing back.”

Tears stood in Will’s eyes but he nodded, letting out a shuddering breath. Hannibal felt the weight of Will’s gaze as he sucked the rosy tip, then continued down the shaft, closing his eyes to savor and catalog the tastes, textures and scents of his new lover.

His own desire sang through him, building with every uttered grunt and sweet low moan he drew from Will. His fingers slipped behind and between Will’s testicles, gently exploring the

sensitivity as he ventured further back. When he reached the puckered entrance, the tensed muscles told him he'd pushed too far, so Hannibal coaxed new sounds by teasing Will's testicles.

It was confirmation of something Hannibal had suspected since Will's attack by Tier and Stammets. Despite working the back room and prostituting himself for the past four years, Will remain untouched. How, Hannibal was fascinated to know, but now wasn't the time, as he felt Will's control slipping and sucked Will deeper.

The light touch to his shoulders grew heavier until Will was gripping him, his balance thrown off by the pleasure rising in him. Hannibal grabbed firm hold of Will's ass with both hands, went down as far as he could and watched Will's face as he climaxed, swallowing until Will softened in his mouth.

Hannibal pressed his open mouth to Will's abdomen, breathing in the now sharp musk as he caught his breath. His forehead was constantly nudged by Will's own harsh breathing, and a tentative touch became a thumb rubbing along the shell of his ear.

"*Hannibal*." The low, desperate, longing plea drew him to his feet, careful not to step on Will's jacket.

He was enfolded in Will's embrace, a nose tucked tight against his neck as a hand gently caressed his neglected erection through his trousers. Lips trailed along his jaw as Will opened his belt and fly, a firm hand wrapping around his erection and giving a long, slow pull.

Lips touched the corner of his mouth and Hannibal tilted his head to meet them, only for them to skitter along his lips and press to the other side of his mouth. Not to be denied, Hannibal grasped Will's head and brought their mouths together, urging Will's lips to part for him but sensing reluctance, very faint but present.

Others might not have noticed, but Hannibal still had Will's taste lingering on his tongue—and that, Hannibal realized, was the problem. He drew back enough to see Will's eyes, caressing his thumbs over Will's cheeks. "You don't approve of your taste," he said lightly.

The barest flicker of revulsion passed through Will's otherwise warm, sated eyes. "I don't approve of any taste," he answered, his courage weak but persistent. "I've never found it appealing, but especially my own." He licked his lips, tongue-tip peeking out in temptation for Hannibal to bite it. "Would you object to a condom?"

Hannibal saw the distant hope in Will's gaze and heard it in his words, but he was moved by Will's honesty. Trust was necessary if Will was to continue to work for him, and even greater if he was to continue as his lover. "I cannot object to something that makes you comfortable," Hannibal answered softly, letting his hands slide to Will's shoulders.

Will quickly pulled his trousers back together, removing a condom from his pocket and kneeling on the jacket still between them. Hannibal thrummed with anticipation—was Will an expert with men's pleasure points, or had his trouble with men driven him to technique over sensuality?

As the condom was rolled on and Will's lips followed it down, Hannibal allowed his mind to be overtaken by pleasure. Will's tongue was sure and quick, his fingers confident as they teased the inside of his thighs. Nips to his abdomen and inner thighs, soothed with that same sharp tongue, fingers twisting and pressing in just the right spots to cause Hannibal's breath to stutter.

Scratching lightly at the back of Will's head, Hannibal was careful not to thrust or exert any pressure. He didn't want Will's obedience in this; he wanted Will's passion to lead him.

Nails pressed more firmly against his thighs as Will's eyes sought his, dragging his fingers down slowly, undoubtedly leaving red marks. Hannibal could have stopped the low moan that rose at seeing the desire in Will's eyes, but he let it free, enjoying the spark of pride that lit Will's gaze.

Hannibal's soft grunts became more uncontrolled the closer he got to orgasm. His body was winding tightly, his testicles drawing up, yet he tried to hold it off just a minute longer, fascinated by Will's drugged expression. Eyes half-closed, Will sank down on him and swallowed, digging his nails into the tender flesh of Hannibal's ass.

Hannibal's orgasm was dragged out of him, glorious and satisfying, as much as his mind was energized. As his body savored the high, Will climbed to his feet as if in a daze, staring heavy-lidded at his mouth.

With a low groan, Will hooked a hand behind Hannibal's head and pressed their mouths together, lips parted and tongue searching, sharing breath neither of them actually had. Hannibal hauled Will tight against him and held firm to Will's ass, enjoying the flex of muscle beneath his hand.

When the rush of orgasm had faded and their kisses gentled, Hannibal became aware of the drying saliva on his skin and the uncomfortable stickiness inside the condom. "We need to clean up," he murmured against Will's lips, reluctant to stop worrying them between his teeth to encourage their rosy fullness.

Will's hand lightly rested on his shoulder, but his other hand gripped his bare hip possessively. "I don't suppose you have a sink in here," Will replied distractedly, flicking his tongue against Hannibal's mouth.

With great reluctance, Hannibal pulled himself fully away from Will and retrieved his handkerchief from his pocket. "No," he replied ruefully, cleaning himself up as best he could and tucking the used condom into the cloth before stuffing it into his coat pocket.

Before Hannibal could reach for his trousers, Will bent down to pull them up, dragging them over his hips and ass before securing the zip and button, then the belt. Hannibal's shirt remained untucked, as did Will's, giving clear evidence to their activities.

Hannibal set to work straightening his appearance, but only after a pointed glare did Will begin to set himself to rights. When they were suitably presentable, Hannibal smoothed down Will's curls, but they refused to be tamed. He chuckled. "Your hair has a mind of its own, just like its owner."

Will's grimace was unexpected. "It was useful when I was hustling, but since it had to be cut short, I got used to it." He absently petted his hair down. "I've been putting off visiting the barber. I've been putting off everything, except for…"

Will's voice trailed off and Hannibal picked up the thread. "Carlo Deogracias. He'll be dealt with soon," he assured Will, giving one last, thorough look to Will's post-climax softness. He saw Will do the same to him, then they picked up the scattered chess pieces and reset the board for their weekly game.

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The weeks of subterfuge, stakeouts and bribery had been worth it, just to get to this moment.

Hannibal brought Matteo Deogracias and accomplice Nicolas Boyle to his lieutenants, and wrought his own form of justice upon those who would threaten his Business and his life. He took his signature chunk of flesh from Boyle's shoulder and Matteo's arm, leaving no doubt as to who had killed them, blood swirling down the drain of the steel kill room.

Hannibal feasted on their offal, the acidic taste of fear lingering on his tongue.

Carlo Deogracias—Hannibal saved for Will. By rights, his life belonged to Hannibal, but it would be a good test of Will's loyalty and Hannibal was curious as to what his lion in lamb's clothing would do.

Tied to a chair in the middle of a locked room as promised, Hannibal watched from the small window in the steel door as Will circled the bound Deogracias, carefully measuring his steps. Will had removed his suit jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves before entering the kill room, refusing to give Hannibal a hint as to what he had planned.

"Lecter has already gotten confessions out of your brother and Nicolas Boyle," Will recounted as though he were reading a grocery list, bored and indifferent. "I'm simply giving you the same chance to atone for your sins."

"You're going to kill me so's he can eat me," Deogracias sneered, jerking his body toward the door and Hannibal safely on the other side. "Why should I say anything, *pretty boy*?"

Will shrugged, looking over at Hannibal with a wicked glint in his eye. "To keep breathing a few minutes longer?"

Hannibal narrowed his eyes in warning, though inside his heart swelled with pride. Will was in his element, confident and at ease with only a single knife resting on the lone table in Deogracias's line of sight.

Will stopped in front of Deogracias, bending down slightly to look the other man in the eye. "I know what you want. You want to strip Lecter of his power and status because he didn't *earn* them. He hasn't had to work for anything in his life. It's all been handed to him on a silver platter without question."

"He doesn't *deserve* to run the Family," Deogracias snarled.

“You alone see how weak the Family has become under Lecter’s control. Killing Lecter would prove your superiority,” Will taunted sweetly, his voice dangerously hypnotic. Hannibal didn’t know whether to be insulted or impressed. Will was clearly encouraging Deogracias’ anger, but to what end, Hannibal had no guesses. “If you killed Lecter, no one would question your dominance. No one would object to you taking over the Business. Yours to control. Your domain.”

Deogracias looked absolutely mesmerized by Will’s words. He made as if to get up, belatedly realizing he was still tied to the chair. His anger pushed at Hannibal several feet away behind the locked door, a living and dangerous thing. “Why are you fucking with me? I ain’t getting out of this room alive. Just kill me already!”

“Because Lecter isn’t looking to the future, just his immediate pleasures.” Will casually walked around Deogracias, dragging his fingers along the bound man’s shoulders. “Because I don’t want *second best*.” Will’s dark smile was a thing of beauty, full of promise and pain. “I’ll make a deal with you. If you can best me, I promise to give you Lecter right now…and me.”

Hannibal felt as shocked as Deogracias looked. His chameleon was entirely unpredictable, a savage man with a voice that dripped honeyed promises. He expected Deogracias to rage and spit at Will’s outrageous proposition, but Deogracias looked confused and aroused. If that was Will’s intention, it was working beautifully.

Will’s smile was knowing as he sank down on his haunches in front of Deogracias. “I’ve felt your eyes on me whenever we’re in a room together. I’ve caught you checking out my ass. Everyone thinks it belongs to that man out there,” Will dismissed Hannibal with toss of his head and Hannibal played along, glaring at the back of Will’s head through the small window. “I’ll let you in on a secret. No one’s had me yet. I’ve been toying with Lecter, teasing him with something he’ll never have.”

“Why should I give a fuck, pretty boy?” Deogracias growled, though the heat in his voice wasn’t entirely from anger. His eyes were dark with lust as he lunged forward in his chair again. Hannibal’s breath caught before seeing that Will had placed himself just out of Deogracias’s reach.

“Which do you want more, Carlo? A chance at killing Lecter? Or fucking me while he watches, knowing I wouldn’t give it up to him?” Will taunted lightly as he circled around the back of the chair again.

Hannibal held himself in check as Will picked up the knife and casually flipped it, worry beginning to crawl along his skin. He had seen the evidence of Will’s skill on Stammets’ body, but he had also seen the battered, bruised mess that had been Will’s.

“Think how sweet it would feel to *take* something that *belonged* to Lecter. Fucking me would enrage him. He’d crash into this room blinded and distracted by his emotions, easy prey for someone like you.” Will leaned down to whisper in Deogracias’ ear, “I’ll get Lecter into this room where you can bring him to his knees. Make him beg for his life. Make him beg for *my* life. Or you could forget fucking and killing and simply escape. Choice is up to you.”

The room was filled with the harsh breathing of Deogracias, the scent of anger and arousal sharp in Hannibal's nose.

Will still held the knife in his hand as he squeezed both of Deogracias's shoulders, promising in a sickly-sweet tone, "If you lose, I'll cut off your junk and feed it to you. I don't let *second best* touch me." Before Hannibal could say anything, Will swiftly cut the ropes from around Deogracias's wrists.

Hannibal cursed under his breath as Will threw the knife into the far corner and crouched into a defensive position, Deogracias now a free man.

To Hannibal's surprise, Deogracias didn't go for the door, but instead went straight for Will with a great roar.

Hannibal watched, with his heart in his throat and tension coiling every muscle, as Will dodged around Deogracias's attempted grabs at him, looking like a dancer as he spun and ducked, twisting out of Deogracias's reach.

The wild, taunting smile suited Will, matching the fire that lit his eyes as he swept a leg out from Deogracias. The next instant, Will was on his back as Deogracias hauled him down to the floor, Hannibal's hands curling into fists as an arm went around Will's throat.

Clawing at Deogracias's shirt sleeve until it ripped, Will dug his nails in deep and dragged skin away from bone, dislodging himself from Deogracias's chokehold, breathing hard and no longer smiling. His face was a mask of intent, set in hard lines and determination.

Hannibal felt something break free inside his chest, a loosening that enabled him to draw his first deep breath in minutes as the two men circled each other, neither seemingly remembering the knife that lay against the wall.

Deogracias flexed his good hand and feinted left, but Will's stance never wavered. Deogracias had his back to Hannibal and suddenly made his move, charging low across the floor. Will sidestepped easily and spun around, both Will and Hannibal seeing the knife in Deogracias's hand at the same time.

The smile that Deogracias bestowed on Will promised pain. "Maybe I'll cut off your junk before I fuck you, eh pretty boy?"

Will didn't flinch, didn't acknowledge Deogracias's taunt in any way. Hannibal could see his intense focus, Will's mind turning through possible moves and countermoves, just as in their games of chess.

"You're not going to defend your rent boy, Lecter?" Deogracias taunted him when it was clear that he wasn't going to goad Will any further. "Was he right? Weren't you *enough* for him?"

"He doesn't need my protection," Hannibal replied calmly, meeting Will's eyes. What he saw there made his heart leap into his throat, but before he could do more than narrow his eyes in disapproval, Will advanced.

In a blur of motion, Will was on his stomach with Deogracias's knee between his shoulder blades, his head held up by Deogracias's hand on his chin and the knife scraping along his overstretched throat. "Maybe I won't bother fucking you," Deogracias hissed, yanking Will's head back further, Will's sound of distress muted by Deogracias's hand. "What do you think?"

Hannibal focused on the blood that ran down Will's neck, imagining the satisfaction of peeling the skin from Deogracias's fully-aware body, listening to his screams and pleas for mercy until Hannibal took his lying, vile tongue and boiled it.

"I *said*, what do you *think*?" Deogracias snarled as he slammed Will's head onto the floor, stretching Will's arms above his head and holding them with his good hand. In the shaky left one, Deogracias held the knife and it took every ounce of Hannibal's willpower not to kick the door in.

Hannibal didn't know how injured Will was; he remained pliant and still, only his labored breathing proving he was still alive.

"What, giving up already?" Deogracias huffed as he dug his knee into Will's back. "You're going to love being fucked by a *real* man." Deogracias pinned Hannibal with a grotesque smirk, but still addressed Will. "And when I'm through with you, you'll be damaged goods. With your knowledge of the Family, he'll have to kill you…if I don't first."

Hannibal's smile was as cold as Arctic air to match his voice. "I will carve out your organs one by one and roast them in garlic. When your body is no longer able to sustain your life, I will feast upon your heart," he promised.

Deogracias's confidence wavered, but not enough for him to release Will. Hannibal was at odds with himself. He had made a promise to not interfere unless Will was at risk, but he didn't know how far Will intended to take this. Hannibal's nerves were already on edge; he wouldn't be able to stand much more before he stormed in and snapped Deogracias's neck, Will's plan be damned.

Hannibal's stomach lurched as Deogracias grabbed hold of Will's belt and attempted to pull his trousers down, but his hand was too slick with blood to get a good hold. He yanked harder, drawing a pained groan from Will and a snarl from Hannibal, but Will's trousers remained around his waist.

"You gotta be shitting me," Deogracias grumbled and shoved Will onto his back, a broken moan emanating from Will.

Hannibal watched with growing admiration as Deogracias dropped the knife to fumble at Will's belt buckle with his bad hand, distracted into loosening his grip on Will's wrists. While Will's legs were pinned by most of Deogracias's body, he had limited movement over the rest of his body.

Hannibal leaned forward, eagerly waiting until Deogracias was focused on Will's belt buckle, then watched Will come to life. His hand unerringly curled around the handle of the knife and

plunged it into Deogracias's upper arm. Shoulder. Lower back in rapid succession. All accompanied by Deogracias's howls of pain and outrage.

Will shoved Deogracias off of him and scrambled to his feet, Hannibal catching a glimpse of the blood smeared across his throat before Will was on Deogracias, slicing through the front of his trousers. Deogracias's arms flailed ineffectually, the cuts Will had made to his arm and shoulder damaging the muscle. Impressed at Will's knowledge of anatomy, Hannibal relaxed as Will took charge, using his body weight to hold Deogracias down.

True to his word, Will cut off Deogracias's penis and testicles. "That's for betraying the Family." He crammed the mutilated flesh inside Deogracias's mouth, blood spilling over Will's hands as he kept Deogracias from spitting them out. "And that's for calling me *pretty boy*."

Deogracias's choking, muffled screams were music to Hannibal's ears, the room so far beneath the true basement of Lecter House that no sound could penetrate the surrounding steel and dirt. Hannibal had taken care of dozens of people who had displeased him in this very room, but never in such a violent, messy way.

Will's shirt was splattered with blood and his trousers soaked in it, the pool spreading beneath Deogracias's body as his death throes stilled. Blood stained Will's arms up to his elbows, coated his hands and dripped off his fingers as he pushed himself off of the body.

Hannibal roused himself from the hypnotic display, unlocking the door and walking cautiously up to this exquisite creature.

"Are you really going to eat him?" Will asked curiously, seemingly oblivious to the state he was in. There was a calmness in his eyes as he regarded Hannibal, to go with the satisfaction that Hannibal could taste on the air.

"He doesn't deserve to be meat," he dismissed, reaching out to brush his thumb along the cut on Will's throat. His fingers lingered on skin, curling around the back of Will's neck of their own accord.

Eyes flashing, Will tilted his chin up, further opening the cut. "I don't get off on killing," he warned, taking a half step back.

"Nor do I," Hannibal concurred, tightening his hold and fixing his gaze on Will's mouth. "Watching you toy with him, flaunting your control over the situation, that is what captivated me." He leaned in, parted lips just barely touching Will's. "Exerting your power over him."

Will's lips wavered, the slightest nudge to try to bring their mouths closer denied by Hannibal. "Bastard," Will grumbled, hands reflexively coming up to grab onto Hannibal but stopping before they touched the immaculate suit. Will glared at Hannibal's smug grin.

"Learning restraint can have a pleasant outcome," Hannibal said, letting his hand drop from Will's skin. "Come. The others are upstairs, waiting to hear how judgement was passed."

He bade Will go first, but Will turned back at the threshold. "What about the body?"

“My cleaning crew will deposit the Deogracias brothers and Boyle outside Hobbs’ main house,” Hannibal recounted, despising the need for war between their Organizations, but it was necessary. His Family had been threatened; he must answer.

Will’s quiet, “Can I help?” nearly undid him.

His hand was back at Will’s neck, dragging him closer. His eyes bore into Will’s, blazing with hunger and desire for this man who called to the beast caged in his chest, taunting it out to play. “No,” he rasped, feeling the disappointment radiating from Will. “You’ve done your duty for this Family and for me. I want to tend to that cut and make sure he didn’t injure you elsewhere.”

The heat in Will’s eyes softened; his frown transforming into a rueful smile as he stepped out from Hannibal’s touch. “My belt always leaves a bruise,” he said dismissively, as if he fended off attackers every day.

Hannibal trailed him up the stairs, admiring the view and wondering at circumstance that had brought this young man into his life. He did not believe in fate, but perhaps like called out to like, and the universe answered.

The cleaning crew were waiting at the top of the stairs, along with three of his lieutenants as witnesses. Hannibal glared at the quick glances of revulsion that passed between them, stifling any comments that may have been forthcoming. Hannibal had never returned from the kill room soaked in blood, after all; he was far too meticulous in his justice.

“Mr. Graham has taken care of Deogracias. Please see that he joins his brother and Mr. Boyle,” he dismissed the crew, who hurried down the stairs. The lieutenants nodded their heads in agreement of the situation, sent a polite nod to Will, then filed out, leaving Hannibal alone with Will.

He walked down the hall toward his study, hearing Will fall into step behind him. Once inside, Hannibal continued to the back wall and pressed on a hidden latch, the bookcase opening to his private bedroom.

He stepped inside, watching Will as he took in the bed, small table and bathroom.

If Will was impressed, it didn’t show in his expression or voice. “This isn’t your master bedroom,” he stated with confidence.

“It was my parents’ bolt-hole,” Hannibal confirmed, crossing to the bathroom and twisting the taps on the claw foot tub. “I doubled the size to add the bathroom. The open toilet was unappealing,” he explained as he tested the water, adjusting the taps until it flowed hotter.

“And you brought me here to let me clean up?” Will asked, a teasing undertone negating any naiveté he tried to flaunt.

When Hannibal looked up from the tub, Will had removed every stitch of clothing, blood smeared from his neck down to his toes. “You appear to be ready for the bath,” he remarked casually, rounding up towels and ignoring Will’s naked state.

Will twirled his hand in the water, Hannibal feeling his heavy gaze on him as he placed the towels on the sink. “Can I ask a favor?” Before Hannibal had a chance to agree or dissent, Will continued, “Will you wash me?”

Hannibal turned at hearing the splash of water, Will climbing into the tub and relaxing back into the heat. Hannibal couldn’t help but smile at Will’s boldness but he shook his head, a denial ready on his tongue, when Will bit his lower lip and murmured, “Please?” It was a simple, base ploy that shouldn’t have affected him like it did, but Hannibal felt that bite deep in the pit of his stomach.

Then Will made one more plea, heat pooling low in Hannibal’s gut at the pure desire that lit Will’s gaze. “And take off your shirt? I’m naked before you, but you’re fully dressed.”

Hannibal was removing his jacket before he was conscious of his reply, rapidly unbuttoning his vest but taking more care with his cuffs. At Will’s satisfied smile, he slowed, deciding he had given in enough. He finished rolling up his sleeves and left the top two buttons on his shirt unbuttoned.

He kissed the pout from Will’s mouth, nipping at it gently as he shut off the taps. “Don’t presume too much,” he threatened lightly as he ran his hand from Will’s knee to his ankle, barely making a ripple in the water. “Never forget who I am.”

Will met his gaze squarely. “You’re the man who holds all the power,” he replied quietly, almost a moan.

Hannibal ignored the flattery as he lathered the washcloth and began to clean the blood from Will’s arms and chest. As Will had predicted, bruises were beginning to form on his abdomen and a knot was rising on his forehead where Deogracias had slammed it into the floor. “Why did you cut Deogracias free?” Hannibal asked as he wrung out the cloth and reapplied soap.

Will’s eyes were closed, a pleased upturn to his mouth at each strong caress down his leg or arm. “I won’t kill a man in cold blood, but I only know how to defend myself with my knife. That requires close quarters. I need to distract my opponent to get in close enough.”

“Do you often use your body as the distraction?” Hannibal asked as he scrubbed at Will’s fingers, trying to remove the skin beneath his fingernails and blood embedded in his cuticles.

A slight shrug disturbed the water. “I learned the hard way that it’s my greatest weapon. Men often think with their dicks so I encourage that thinking. Makes them stupid and careless, underestimating me.”

Hannibal slowed his strokes along Will’s body, judging the moment best for prying into Will’s past. “So you were truthful with Deogracias,” he remarked lightly, waiting to see if Will picked up his cue from their conversation.

Will’s entire demeanor changed, from relaxed comfort to sour tension. “You’ve been waiting to ask that,” he observed dryly, resignation in his tone. “You’re familiar with du Maurier’s stables?”

Hannibal felt his strokes slowing to a stop as the white noise that always accompanied mention of Bedelia du Maurier's Organization rang in his ears. Elegant, polished and incredibly well-spoken, she wore her unique cruelty like a fur draped over her shoulders. Her cache of men was notorious, catering to very specific clientele, but that wasn't what made her reputation.

Buying out male prostitutes' contracts and dragging them to New York, du Maurier literally enslaved her purchases, ensuring they could never escape. She had once described the myriad of devices her clients used on her slaves at an Organization meeting, her tone rich with pride, enjoying everyone's discomfort. "I am," Hannibal answered, not wanting to think of Will forced to suffer such agony.

A broken noise caught in Will's throat, his fingers tightening on the edges of the tub. "When you're living on the street, your nightmares aren't about starving or getting killed. They're about her kidnapping you or buying out your contract, locking you in a narrow stall and being fucked until she can't make money from you anymore." Will's skin was pale beneath the water droplets sliding down his temples. "I swore I would never let a man fuck me. I risked punishment from the House Boss rather than take it up the ass."

"The client you killed in Chesapeake City was self-defense," Hannibal noted quietly, wishing he'd kept the vile Abel Gideon alive so he could kill him again, this time much more slowly.

The water rippled with Will's shiver. "That was survival. If Charlie had fucked me, Gideon would have sold me to du Maurier or chained me up just like she would have, letting every paying client fuck me raw."

Will's description of what could have been his fate triggered a surge of protection in Hannibal. His hand went to cup Will's cheek, feeling the cold, clammy skin. "Du Maurier can't touch you, Will," he stressed, trying to ease the sharp scent of fear that rose over the tang of blood. "You're no longer a sex worker and you're under my protection."

"It's rumored she can smell it on you. If you've been fucked," Will whispered brokenly. "She doesn't care if you're paid for sex or not. What she wants, she takes."

A growl of possessiveness caught in his throat and Hannibal forced his hand to relax against Will's cheek, envisioning du Maurier's throat crushed beneath his grip. "She would have to go through this entire Family, and then me," he promised. As his words sank in, a tear slipped down Will's cheek, catching on Hannibal's thumb.

"And if somehow, we all failed, *you* would fight her to the death," Hannibal said, bringing his other hand to frame Will's face, waiting until the fear receded from Will's eyes. "I once told you that you were ferocious. I witnessed that ferocity today. You had no fear facing Deogracias. No hesitation. You lured him in and destroyed him with his own weakness. You were deadly and breathtaking, my lion in lamb's clothing."

Color returned rapidly to Will's neck and Hannibal had to duck down to kiss the warmed skin. He felt Will's fingers smooth over his, able to feel their slight tremors. Will's smile was as tenuous as his touch. "I was driven by thoughts of you. What you would have done to him

in my place. The rage you would have felt, the betrayal, the disappointment. The broken trust. You treated him like family. He *was* Family, but he didn't understand what that meant."

Will's eyes shone with emotion and tears that didn't fall this time. "Family is more than security and love. It's…a *feeling*, knowing you belong and are accepted for who you are. I've looked for that ever since my dad died. I found it once before and lost it too soon. I've found it again with you. My new Family."

Will's emotional outpouring sliced a bright pain deep inside Hannibal, sealed as quickly as it had appeared. He pressed a soft, tender kiss to Will's slightly parted lips, an appeasement for his next words. "Our Family is being threatened and we must be ready. By tomorrow morning, we will most likely be at war. You'll need to start wearing your piece at all times." It was distasteful to Hannibal to wear a gun while inside his own home, but he needed protection most of all.

Will brushed his lips against the corner of Hannibal's mouth, almost in apology. "I wasn't exaggerating when I said I only know how to use a knife. I've never even held a gun."

Hannibal pulled away from the tempting touch, burying his irritation beneath his concern. His hand trailed down Will's shoulder, fingers tracing over the tell-tale puckering of an old bullet wound on Will's upper arm. "A knife won't protect you on the streets. I'll arrange for Mr. Brown to start your lessons later tonight."

Weariness that had lurked deep in Will's eyes now crept to the surface, Will sagging back against the tub and away from Hannibal's light touch. "Whenever you think is best," he agreed, the tightening of skin around his eyes involuntary as Will stretched to reach the washcloth, the fading adrenaline leaving behind the aches of the fight.

Hannibal accepted the silent dismissal, needing some emotional distance to compose himself. "I'll clean that wound when you're done," he nodded to Will's throat. He dried his hands and redressed himself, settling his jacket on his shoulders before returning to the main room.

He gathered Will's ruined clothes from the floor and searched through the pockets as he had the first time Will had come to him bloody and bruised, setting Will's belongings on the small table before dumping the clothes in the trash.

Hannibal took his time searching his armoire for items suitable for Will, settling on gray slacks and a red dress shirt that might fit him better than his ruined clothes. "What do you ordinarily do after a fight?" Hannibal asked as he laid the boxers he'd found on top of the clothes on the bed.

"Bleed. Sleep," Will muttered from directly behind him. He was rubbing a towel in his damp hair, another secured around his hips, and his eyes were barely open.

Hannibal guided Will to sit on the bed, examining the long but relatively shallow cut on his neck. Will remained motionless as Hannibal cleaned and bandaged the cut, taking the towel from Will's unresisting hand and wiping the last of the blood from his sternum. "Lie down. Rest."

Not bothering with the clothes laid out for him, Will dropped his remaining towel onto the floor and crawled beneath the sheets, pulling them up to his ears.

The bed was not as large as the one in Hannibal's master bedroom, nor were the sheets as crisp, but Will sighed contentedly and burrowed deeper into the pillow. Hannibal resisted the urge to join him, even knowing that Will's naked body was leaching heat into his sheets.

He gathered the towel from the floor, draped it over the side of the tub and straightened the few items out of place, reluctant to leave Will alone after such a brutal fight. But there was a war to prepare for and Will's recuperative sleep would have to be brief before he began his training.

Hannibal pulled the lever to release the door, feeling it open silently behind him. Believing an hour's rest would be sufficient, he left Will to sleep while he called for Brown, outlining Will's firearm training.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> In which the war starts, Will learns to shoot a gun, an attempt is made on Hannibal's life, and a few more complications to Will's relationship with Hannibal present themselves.
>
> Tags for this chapter: Frottage.

Will was very, very good at hiding his discomfort, but Matthew's constant touches were beginning to grate on him.

He knew some adjustments were necessary to correct his stance, but Matthew didn't remove his hand from Will's shoulder as he aimed at the bullseye. It distracted him enough that Matthew playfully admonished his hit to the outer edge of the target and folded his hand over Will's on the grip, lifting the gun higher. Matthew's breath tickled Will's ear as he instructed, "You're letting your arms drop."

Will wanted to snarl at him that he couldn't *focus* with Matthew's overbearing presence, but he didn't dare. Matthew was one of Hannibal's lieutenants and beyond not wanting to disappoint Hannibal, Will didn't want to face Hannibal's wrath if Matthew said anything about his unwillingness to cooperate.

Will steadied his breathing, brought the gun up slightly, aimed and fired. It was a better shot, hitting the second ring around the center, but he could feel Matthew's humorous disappointment.

When Matthew took a step away, Will fired in rapid succession until the gun was empty, smiling in triumph at the cluster of holes at the edge of the center mark. He heard Matthew's whistle of appreciation but ignored it in favor of reloading the gun. He fired a few shots before slowly removing his other hand from the grip. His aim wavered but he corrected, staying within the first ring and just touching the center mark.

"Damn, Will," Matthew praised him, not with a clap on the back but a long, slow stroke across his shoulders.

"I just needed to relax into it," Will dismissed the praise, wishing he could shake off the hand burning through his clothes. Matthew had always been friendly with him, even a tad overfriendly, but this blatant flirting crossed a line.

Matthew had to know he and Hannibal were involved. Beverly often shared gossip over their long chess games and speculation about his relationship with Hannibal was at the very top. She delighted in his squirming discomfort but assured Will that most of the inner circle

approved. She didn't have to list who the dissenters were: Brian Zeller had never warmed to him and Elliot Buddish believed Will beneath everyone because of his past.

It didn't help that Will didn't know what was appropriate to handle on his own or what he should bring to Hannibal's attention.

He knew it was dangerous for Hannibal to be involved with anyone, but sleeping with someone from his own Organization made it even more so. It made Hannibal vulnerable, open to blackmail and threats from all sides. Will was aware of the dangers to himself—kidnapping and violence were only some of the disasters that could befall him when it got out that he was sleeping with the Head of Lecter Family.

Even though they'd only sucked each other off…and Hannibal had bathed him…and they'd shared some damn intense kisses…he still hesitated to even *think* of them as in a relationship, keeping whatever they were firmly away from any deeper emotional ties. He wasn't a fool in love and he wasn't naïve. He wanted Hannibal and he knew Hannibal wanted him, but if their desires threatened Hannibal's position, Will wouldn't hesitate to end it and disappear.

But he wouldn't be coerced by the likes of Matthew, who seemed determined to force Will into a precarious position. Refuse Matthew's advances and his life would be hell, or give in to Matthew and risk his place within the Organization, not to mention his life. Will had no doubt if he returned even the slightest hint of kindness to Matthew, it would be taken as encouragement, trapping him in an endless circle of escalating unwanted attention.

Will's politeness was wearing thin, but he was at a loss at how to proceed.

Thankfully, or maybe hearing his silent plea, Matthew kept a respectable distance from Will as he continued to practice, growing in confidence with the power he unleashed from his hand. So different from a knife, lacking the intimacy of feeling victory over his attacker, Will appreciated the gun's accuracy and speed. The war that was almost upon them would best be ended as quickly as possible, to minimize casualties within the Families and the community.

Will didn't know Hannibal's timetable for delivering Deogracias' and Boyle's bodies to Hobbs' doorstep, but the early morning hours would be ideal. As daylight broke, so would the first strike against Hobbs' Family.

It was well after midnight and Will's brief nap had refreshed him, but only exacerbated his body's aches. He grimaced and rubbed at his shoulder, placing the gun on the crate next to the box of bullets. "Am I good enough to pass muster yet?"

Matthew seemed to give it serious thought, inspecting the target and Will's progressively tighter shots. "Yeah, that might do. Though hitting the driver in a moving vehicle is a hell of a lot harder than a stationary target."

Will hid his flinch from Matthew, tucking the gun into the holster and pocketing the remaining bullets. "Nothing like learning on the job," he replied with the full depth of his sarcasm, his smile bitter. "Hopefully Hobbs will see he's in the wrong and surrender before it comes to that."

Matthew's hand on his shoulder squeezed hard this time, then dropped away. "When have you ever known the Head of an Organization to surrender?"

Will's hands froze in mid-motion pulling on the unfamiliar shoulder holster. This wasn't a war over territory, it was about pride. Hobbs had taken a gamble with the Deogracias brothers and lost. He had lost face with his Family and needed to prove his worthiness to remain as their leader. "Shit," he grumbled, stuffing his arms into his jacket sleeves. "This isn't going to end any time soon, is it?"

Matthew's tone was solemn as he agreed, "This is going to get very, very ugly. If we're lucky, we'll wipe out the lot of Hobbs' Organization before we lose too many of our own."

Will was somber on the drive back to Lecter House. It was nearing one in the morning but Beverly was as alert as ever, watching the door. She gave him a once-over and ushered him into the sitting room just off the main foyer, angling a chair so she could keep an eye on the entryway. Will sank into the chair opposite her, still deep in thought.

Beverly's harsh words were tempered by her light tone. "Out with it, Graham. It's too damn late and I'm too damn wired to play 20 questions."

Will heard his voice before he'd consciously thought about what problem he wanted to ask about first. "Matthew taught me how to shoot tonight. He kept touching me inappropriately."

Beverly's amused snort drew his undivided attention, but her gaze was worried as she wagged her eyebrows. "What are you, five? Did he grab your ass or crotch?"

Her ribbing had the desired effect: Will sighed and scrubbed his hands down his face, shaking off his reluctance to talk about it. "He kept his hand on my shoulder as I fired. Breathed instructions in my ear. Hands over mine on the grip. Pressed himself against me as he corrected my stance. Fucking rubbed my shoulders as he praised my aim. All innocent touches if you're not accustomed to men's advances."

At Beverly's eyebrows raised in disbelief, Will chuckled. "I'm aware of how men flirt, even if most of the come-ons directed at me consist of, 'I want to fuck your sweet ass' and 'your mouth is so fuckable'."

"Ew." Beverly's nose crinkled up in its adorable way at his crude description. "*So* did not need those images in my head."

Will was unapologetic as he shrugged. "Yeah, well, I don't know what to do about Matthew's attempted flirting. Is he trying to fuck me or fuck with me? Do I confront him about it, let him down gently, tell Hannibal, send you after him, what?"

Beverly ignored his dig at her, her eyes growing distant as Will watched her thoughts race. "Matthew's always been a bit of a loner, but he gets real passionate angry whenever someone fucks over the Family. Doesn't spend his money in the casinos, doesn't get in the other Family's faces. He's solid. He's been a little overfriendly with you, but maybe that's because you're the same age."

It was Will's turn to snort; Matthew was 19 and had been active in the Family since he was thirteen. "How old does he think I am?" He leveled his gaze at Beverly, challenging her, "How old do *you* think I am?"

Her eyes kept darting to the door, Will knew to keep watch, but also to buy herself some time. "Nineteen," she announced confidently. "Eighteen?" she amended on his smirk.

"I'll be 26 in June," he informed her with a lopsided grin, enjoying the surprise that flashed across her features. "Did you honestly think Hannibal would find a 19-year-old interesting enough to blow him?"

"*Will*," she censured him, widening her eyes and patting her chest. He knew her scandalous outrage was put on, as they had often teased each other about their sex lives.

He smirked at her. "What? You're older than Fred, but that hasn't stopped you from coming in with fresh hickeys just below your ear." Beverly was very cryptic about her relationship with Fred; Will only knew his first name and that they'd been dating for almost eight months.

His teasing got the desired effect as color bloomed on her cheeks and she couldn't look him in the eye. "We're not talking about me," she muttered, standing and walking over to the door, leaning heavily against the jamb.

His lightness at their easy banter faded, the weight of what would happen with the dawn settling on his shoulders. "How is it going to start? Will they take a shot at Hannibal, try to blow up his car? This house? Or will they focus on the people around him?"

Beverly didn't take a second to think about it. "Hobbs likes to work quietly in the background, but he won't have a choice this time. His lieutenants will accept nothing less than him leading the charge, not with the mess we're literally leaving on his doorstep. Once they formally decide to go to war, all hell will break loose."

Her smile was almost apologetic, but her honesty was appreciated. "How can I protect him?" he asked quietly, the question that had gnawed at him since he'd uncovered the assassination plot against Hannibal.

This time, Beverly was more thoughtful in her answer. "Keep a sharp eye out. Don't trust anyone asking for help on the street or begging for money. Ignore the little old lady who needs to cross the street. Don't bend down to toss back a baseball rolled your way. Stay focused on where you're going, what you're doing and your surroundings." She sighed. "If I could, I'd keep him locked up in the house, but he's never hidden from a challenger."

Will understood, with a gut-wrenching twist that left him breathless. Hannibal would want to look directly into their eyes, daring them to meet his gaze. Daring them to make the first move. Sneering at the audacity of believing they could best him; that they could do a better job at running the Organization than *him*. Hannibal had built his reputation on respect and fear, and he'd been encouraging the illusion of cannibal his entire tenure, which Will knew wasn't an illusion at all.

And that was what made the idea of a gunfight so offensive. Will knew it was as distasteful to Hannibal as it was to him, but traditions must be upheld, especially within the Organizations. It was why killing Deogracias had been deeply satisfying, knowing with absolute surety that he could never threaten Hannibal or the Family again.

Will sighed and rubbed at his face again. “It’s late, I should go home and get some sleep.” He started to rise, but was stopped by Beverly’s fierce glare.

“You’re staying here,” she informed him, holding up a hand when he started to work up a protest. “I’m making a judgement call, not just because you look like a light breeze would blow you over, but because it won’t be safe on the streets in the morning. You *just* learned how to fire a gun and you’re not prepared to defend yourself.” Her expression softened. “I saw what you did to Carlo. I also saw the careful way you walked in and the stiffness in your movements. This is about protecting you as much as helping you.”

He wanted to rage against her observations, protest that he was fine and was ready and able to defend the Family, but his body was letting him down, steeped with aches and bruises. Another deep sigh and he pushed himself to his feet, biting back a groan. “Which bedroom?”

If Beverly was surprised as his acquiesce, it didn’t show on her face. “The same one you stayed at before. Linens are in the armoire. Try not to wake the whole house when you clomp up the stairs,” she dismissed him with a slight smile.

He smiled tiredly then made his way up to the second floor, barely able to get his jacket, holster and shoes off before tossing the bottom sheet on the bed. He eased down onto the mattress, immediately falling into a deep sleep.

The morning brought no news, though Will could feel the tension in the air. It was a four hour round trip to Hobbs’ house in New Castle, and over breakfast he learned that the bodies had been delivered at three. It was a waiting game now, to see what Hobbs would do.

Hannibal hadn’t joined the rest of them at breakfast, Will assumed to do preparations for the fight ahead. Strategies would need to be worked out, shifts for protection of the House and the lieutenants assigned, moves and counter moves thought out and prepared for.

Will tried to mesh what he knew about Hobbs’ Organization with what he’d learned from Alana, Tier and Stammets. He was acutely aware that Stammets’ death had gone unanswered, perhaps Tier had been a bee in Hobbs’ ear, encouraging the attempted assassination. Will had no doubt that *he* would be a prime target, as Carlo had known about his relationship with Hannibal and wouldn’t have kept that secret from Hobbs.

Knowing he was Hannibal’s vulnerable point sickened Will, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it now. If he was caught, he’d be used as leverage. If he left of his own accord, he wouldn’t be able to protect Hannibal and the Family, and he wouldn’t break his promise to lay down his life for either.

Anticipation roiled like acid in his stomach; Will had never been good at waiting. He asked for something to do, not wanting to be seen as useless, or worse, as being given special privilege to stay at the House because of his involvement with Hannibal.

That's how he found himself in the garage, looking over the six cars at Hannibal's disposal. He helped Raphael Nunez inspect the cars for shorts, loose wires, and anything that didn't belong, fascinated at the care and attention to detail that Raphael showed. He learned that Raphael had worked for the Family since he was seventeen years old, having come straight from Detroit's assembly line, understanding cars as easily as Will understood the motivations of others.

By lunchtime, Will had gone over every inch of two cars and was still buzzing with restless energy. Nothing had happened yet and he knew that Hannibal had tickets for the symphony that evening. It was the worst possible time for Hannibal to go out, but Beverly was right; Hannibal would never back down from a confrontation.

Lunch tasted like ash in Will's mouth, everyone speaking in hushed tones as if listening for the fighting to begin. The doorbell shattered the quiet, hands automatically going for weapons with the exception of Will, who tensed, still as a statue, holding his breath.

A voice boomed throughout the house and everyone reholstered their guns with weary sighs. Will tilted his head, concentrating on the familiar cadence. It'd been nine years since he'd seen Jack Crawford and didn't particularly want to see him now, but curiosity drove him from his chair.

Opening the door an inch, Crawford's muffled voice increased in volume, his attempts to get information out of Beverly enraging Will. They were preparing for a war and Crawford was insinuating himself in the middle of it, demanding answers he had no right to.

Crawford's glare was the same, his larger than life, imposing stature another attempt to intimidate, but Beverly looked bored as he demanded, "You bring me Lecter *now*."

Beverly maintained her silence as she stared at him with a calm but furious expression, refusing to kowtow to Crawford's bullying attempts. If Crawford were anyone other than FBI, Will was sure that Hannibal would have eaten him by now.

Crawford got in Beverly's face, barely an inch from her as he growled impatiently, "I'm asking to speak to Lecter."

"No, you're demanding I fetch him for you like a pair of slippers," Beverly retaliated, staring Crawford down. "Mr. Lecter isn't available to speak to you," she dismissed Crawford with a sneer.

Will admired her phrasing, both insulting and a polite refusal. It was clear that Crawford caught both meanings as he projected his voice so that it ran throughout the house. "There are rumors on the street that Lecter found traitors in his Organization and killed them as an example to others."

Beverly didn't so much as blink at the accusation, further enraging Crawford. Crawford's finger aimed at her chest, but stopped short of touching her. "I'm coming back with a search warrant to tear this place apart with my bare hands."

Will scoffed at the empty threat, wondering why he'd ever been afraid of the man. If Crawford had *any* evidence he wouldn't be threatening; he'd already have the full force of the FBI tearing down the walls of Lecter House.

"I can't say whether or not Mr. Lecter will be in this evening," Beverly deflected easily, walking around Crawford to open the door. "Good afternoon."

Crawford glared around the room one last time, Will catching a fleeting glimpse of the rage in his eyes before Crawford stormed out.

Sighing wearily, Will shut the door and leaned his forehead against it. It was a complication Hannibal didn't need, but he'd been dancing with Crawford longer than Will had known either of them. He only hoped Crawford didn't find out about the symphony and confront Hannibal there; any distraction then could prove fatal.

Hannibal would have several bodyguards with him for his night out, but Will needed to be there and he knew if he asked, he'd be denied. The guards couldn't risk splitting their attention in protecting them both and Will would never put Hannibal in a position to have to protect *him*. It was his job to protect his Don, never mind the voice at the back of his head demanding that he protect his lover.

Decision made, Will slipped out the front door, wary gaze watching for unusual movements. Stepping into his apartment, Will felt too big for the space, its usual centering calm painfully absent. He had outgrown the space, in more ways than one, and came to the decision that it was time to move on.

Shifting his mental attitude, he changed into his favorite working outfit, adjusting the unfamiliar weight of the gun against his side, the holster digging into a bruise on his shoulder giving him a sharp reminder of what he'd done.

Will sorted through his belongings, cramming as many items as he could into his carpet bag. Not wanting to leave anything he'd earned behind, he left some money for his roommate's bag and filled it with the last of his clothing. He added his hats on top and closed the bag, settling his favorite fedora on his head and tipping the brim down over his eyes. The last item was his notebook full of names and gifts given to him from clients, a checklist so he would always wear the appropriate suit or accessory.

He split the money he'd hidden away into two bundles and wrapped them around his ankles, pulling his socks and boots over them. If he was jumped as an easy mark rather than attacked for being part of Lecter Family, at least he'd have money to buy new things. He did another sweep of the room, checking the floorboards and tapping on the backs and undersides of drawers, making sure he had uncovered all of his hiding places.

He grabbed his top hat and bags and made his way downstairs, turning into the *Silver Diner* and heading toward the back end of the counter. "Hey, Ruby," he called, acknowledging one of the waitresses he'd come to know in his many nights holed up in a booth. In truth, he knew all the waitresses and even the owner, chatting with them in case he needed a backup plan to escape.

“Hey there, sweets,” Ruby replied as she cleared the empty plates off the counter, stopping short as she caught her first look at him. Her expression darkened. “I thought you were done with that,” she nodded to his suit, knowing what it signified.

He offered her a meager smile. “The meal ticket ran dry and I don’t have the rent,” he said gruffly with a slight shrug. “Can I leave my things here until I find a new place?” He didn’t like lying to Ruby; she’d been nothing but nice to him, but he didn’t have a choice. He couldn’t risk his plans being discovered.

Her hands were reaching for the bags before she’d finished speaking. “You don’t have to ask, sweets. I’ll keep them behind the counter so no one sees them.”

His grateful smile was genuine, but it fell away as soon as he exited the diner. He only had a few hours to stake out the concert hall and find an unsuspecting date, without any of the Family recognizing him.

He settled into his old spot at the café across from the hall like slipping into a warm bath, familiar and comforting. It should have disturbed him how easy it was to fall back into his old routine, but it had been less than a year since he’d been accepted into Lecter Family. Years of learned habits didn’t die overnight and his ability to read people was as sharp as ever.

He sipped his coffee and kept careful watch, noting the movements of everyone along the sidewalk and the cars dropping patrons off. He made note of other Family’s members arriving, but dismissed them as threats as they went up the stairs and directly into the concert hall, most likely to enjoy the wine that Hannibal supplied.

Only two people stood out: the nervous-looking kid about age fourteen, who was either afraid of getting caught pickpocketing or had been sent by Hobbs for something much more sinister. The real danger emanated from the dark gray suit with the hat pulled down low, who had been holding cigarette after cigarette in his fingers for almost an hour but only occasionally took a drag. He was scoping the area, his hand suspiciously tucked into his trousers pocket except to light a new cigarette.

When a car pulled up and Randall Tier stepped out, Will’s heart sped up. When Tier pulled Alana Bloom out of the car, his stomach plummeted to his shoes. Rather than going inside the hall, Tier kept a hand tight around Alana’s upper arm as he guided them to the wall surrounding the steps and leaned against it. Tier must have thought that Will would come as Hannibal’s date, using Will’s brief relationship with Alana as emotional blackmail. Will could see the resigned look in her eyes, even from his position across the street: Tier was going to use Alana as a shield if fighting broke out.

As much as it pained him, Will knew he had to ignore Alana’s fate. He spared one last look at her before continuing his inspection of the gathering crowd. As the sun went down, he ordered dinner and picked at it, eyes never leaving the road.

Finally, he spotted his mark. A woman who had been standing off to the side halfway up the stairs, watching each approaching car eagerly, only for her expression to smooth back to polite disinterest as the passengers exited. It was twenty minutes to curtain call and Hannibal

had not yet arrived, so Will crossed the street and approached the woman, striking up a conversation.

“Good evening. You seem to be waiting for someone,” he said quietly, offering a shy smile.

Her answering flicker of a smile was distracted as she peered into another car. “My date said to meet him here twenty minutes ago.”

“What kind of man makes a woman arrive without him and then wait for him?” he asked, projecting as much flirtation as he dared into his words. It could still be a trick, a lonely woman waiting anxiously for a date that stood her up so she had an excuse to linger outside by the arriving cars. But Will sensed she wasn’t lying and that she was genuinely upset that her date hadn’t arrived yet.

She was not youthful and her beauty was muted by her distress, but she finally met his eyes with bold defiance. “A pig of a man,” she declared, a note of annoyance in her voice. “One not worthy of my time.”

He chuckled, not an affectation to win her over, but out of genuine delight. “I should say so,” he agreed and offered her his arm. “Since I’m free this evening, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to the symphony?”

Her hesitation had him immediately on edge. “He was supposed to purchase the tickets. I’m afraid I don’t…”

He relaxed at her embarrassed admission and placed her hand on his arm. “A lady should be pampered. I would be happy to eradicate all trace of the pig from this evening. Will Graham,” he inclined his head politely.

She ducked her head, embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “Katherine McKale. This isn’t necessary. I should just go home,” she muttered with a demure bow of her head.

He had a good vantage point of the arriving cars and people spilling out, but with curtain call only ten minutes away now, the crowd was growing too dense to make out individual faces. He turned his attention back to his mark. “If that’s what you prefer, I won’t take offense,” he assured her. “I only want you to enjoy your evening, whether it’s with me or not.”

Her smile was relieved, her expression pleased. “I do think I’d rather go home, if you don’t mind. It’s very kind of you to offer, but I don’t want to put you out. Certainly a young man such as yourself has plans for a Friday night.”

The anxiety at the clock ticking down to curtain call was absent from his expression as he bent and kissed her hand. “I did have plans, but nothing that couldn’t have waited until tomorrow. Shall I walk you to a cab?”

She nodded and he escorted her down the steps, a sudden tension in the air signaling the arrival of someone—either Hannibal or Hobbs. Hailing one of the empty cabs and making sure Katherine was settled comfortably before bidding her good night, Will immediately

searched the area. He moved along the curb, ignoring the cabs in favor of the larger cars, until he spotted Hannibal emerging from a sea of blacks and grays.

His breath stuttered as he saw the cigarette man casually making his way toward the steps, Hannibal and Beverly just reaching the bottom step.

Beverly was very good, but the cigarette man was almost upon them and she hadn't perceived the threat yet. Will's quick glance at the crowd showed several Lecter Family members scattered throughout, but none seemed focused on the man now two steps below Hannibal. Their eyes were on the crowd still arriving, not those entering the concert hall.

The man's hand finally left his pocket, a small gun hidden in his palm. Will felt as if he were moving through water, slow and clumsy. He tried to call out, but his voice refused to work. His heart was lodged behind his Adam's apple, his steps too slow to reach the man in time to stop him from putting a bullet in Hannibal's kidney or spine.

Time sped up as Will made a leap for the man's legs, gunfire and shouting loud in his ears as he dragged the man down, refusing to let go as hands pulled roughly at him and voices shouted at him.

And then a familiar voice called his name and he opened his eyes. Hannibal was crouched beside him, a streak of blood along his jaw and a softness in his eyes. "He's dead."

Slowly, Will unlocked his grip on the dead man, pushing himself to his feet and staring in amazement as Hannibal rose with him, whole and unharmed as near as he could tell. His voice felt rusty with disuse as he asked, "He didn't hit you?"

"It appears you knocked him off balance, misdirecting his shot." The softness left Hannibal's eyes, replaced by vengeful hardness. "Miss Katz needs medical attention, however."

"I'm fine, Mr. Lecter," Beverly wheezed from her sprawl on the steps, the hand pressed firmly against her side stained with blood. "He barely nicked me."

Will glimpsed the fury in Hannibal's gaze before he turned it to Beverly. "Mr. Price has already gone to fetch Dr. Chilton and they will escort you to back to the house for treatment. You will remain there until Dr. Chilton gives his permission that you are well enough to return home. Is that understood?"

Resignation and defiance warred for dominance in Beverly's eyes, but pain won out and she lowered her gaze respectfully. "Yes, sir."

Hannibal's orders to summon the cleaning crew came at Will as if from a distance, hollow and tinny. He slowly became aware of his surroundings: the Family members crowded around to block the views from the street and the sidewalk, the blood spreading over the concrete from the dead man's body and the small dots of blood seeping into the cream and gray of his own sleeve.

Their strange tableau must have made quite a sight to onlookers, but Will could only see Hannibal, looking at him with a mix of fondness and annoyance.

“I didn’t specifically order you not to be here, but you knew you weren’t part of my entourage for tonight.” Hannibal’s voice was low, but it punched through Will like a battering ram.

“I couldn’t—” Will began, hating that his voice broke. He wasn’t supposed to care so much, so soon. “I swore to protect you,” he said, hoping it was enough. Hoping Hannibal couldn’t see into his soul, couldn’t see what was swelling in his chest and burning his eyes.

A shiver swept through him as Hannibal picked up his hand, and it wasn’t until then that Will noticed the stinging along the side of his palm. “You’re hurt,” Hannibal observed softly, rubbing a thumb along the back of Will’s hand.

With Hannibal’s touch like live electricity against his skin, Will nearly forgot how to breathe. It was only his hand, but Hannibal infused his inspection of Will’s injury with sensuality.

Losing himself in the moment, Will’s free hand drifted up to Hannibal’s jaw, thumbing away the blood to reveal a small scrape. “So are you.”

Will’s eyes never left Hannibal’s as his hand was delicately wrapped in a makeshift bandage of Hannibal’s pocket square, the pain fading to nothing at the care he was being shown.

“Accompany me to the symphony,” Hannibal said, holding Will’s bandaged hand in both of his.

To anyone else, it would have sounded like an order, but Will heard the underlying plea. To be closer. To breathe each other in, knowing they were alive.

Only a few patrons remained in the lobby to watch the drama outside and Will was acutely aware of every pair of eyes on them as he walked beside Hannibal into the concert hall, his hand still clasped in Hannibal’s. Hannibal didn’t release his hand during the performance, their eyes on the stage but all of Will’s attention was on their joined hands resting on Hannibal’s thigh.

Will had attended enough symphonic performances to know this was a rather exceptional piece, but the intimacy of their box seat made it seem like they were the only two patrons in attendance. At intermission, he could feel Hannibal’s reluctance to release his hand to applaud the performance. Will stood beside him though he could only applaud for a brief moment, the scrapes along his palm now throbbing.

When the house lights went up, he guided Hannibal toward the privacy curtain, away from prying eyes. Hannibal followed without a word, his arm snaking behind Will’s back to hold him close as they kissed. Gentle, seeking assurance, Will felt the life flow through Hannibal and felt his heart pound against Hannibal’s chest.

When the intimacy became too raw, Will broke the kiss to rest his head on Hannibal’s shoulder, holding onto Hannibal’s arm with his good hand. He could feel the searing heat of Hannibal’s arm across his lower back, the heavy weight of a hand against the back of his neck and he squeezed his arm tighter around Hannibal’s waist, wishing they were in the privacy of Hannibal’s bedroom.

As if reading his mind, Hannibal murmured, “Stay with me tonight,” lips brushing the shell of his ear.

Will knew his hitched breath was answer enough, but he whispered, “Yes,” just to hear Hannibal’s indrawn breath. Even in his haze of life and lust, he knew what Hannibal wanted from him. He didn’t know if a lifetime of protecting himself could be overcome, but for Hannibal, he was willing to try. “Will you be disappointed if I can’t…?”

Hannibal stopped his words with a nip to his earlobe. “I have no expectations for tonight and neither should you.”

They disentangled themselves when the lights flashed, signaling the second half of the performance. Will was even more aware of Hannibal beside him and their joined hands now resting on Will’s thigh. Anticipation coiled low in his belly, but he knew Hannibal wouldn’t simply leave after the performance. Will summoned his charm and conversed with the patrons Hannibal introduced him to, hyper aware of every touch, every look, that Hannibal bestowed upon him.

Will’s senses went into overload as they exited into the cool night air, trying to take in all the people, checking for weapons in their hands, trying to sense any resentment in the crowd. He saw Family interspersed throughout the crowd doing the same, but he was in Beverly’s place as Hannibal’s personal bodyguard. He clutched at his father’s knife in his pocket, the warm metal instantly calming him.

At seeing police taping off the blood-stained concrete, Will steered Hannibal to the side steps leading away from the main street, not wanting to enforce any further associations between the killing and Lecter Family. He felt the shift as Family moved to follow him, protecting their backs. He kept a sharp eye on the crowd, Beverly’s words about vigilance ringing in his head as they ducked into the car and headed back to the house.

The ride was uneventful and Will didn’t take a proper breath until they were inside the house, the door locked behind them. When Hannibal started up the stairs, Will touched his shoulder to get his attention. “Can I see Beverly first? I want to make sure she’s okay.” It was the truth, but he also needed a moment to catch his breath. Everything that had happened was still buzzing inside him: fear, adrenaline, anger and desire.

Hannibal’s warm gaze flicked over him before he gave a small nod and a smile, continuing up the stairs. Will’s chest ached as he watched Hannibal go, but he followed Jimmy’s directions to Beverly’s temporary room, needing to clear his mind.

He knocked quietly, not wanting to disturb Beverly if she was sleeping. He was surprised when the door opened to reveal a woman with curly red hair and worried blue eyes. Will could see Beverly sleeping behind her. “Can I help you?” the woman whispered.

He motioned for her to join him outside the room and waited for her to shut the door before introducing himself, keeping his voice low. “I’m Will Graham. I wanted to make sure Beverly was okay. I was…”

His unbandaged hand was clasped in her two strong ones and the woman's eyes shone with tears. "Mr. Graham. Bev's told me all about you. I know you've become good friends and I can't thank you enough for helping her tonight."

He fidgeted uneasily under her adoring gaze. "I didn't help. I'm the reason she got shot instead of Mr. Lecter," he deflected, uncomfortable with her praise. He certainly didn't deserve it; if he'd been quicker, he could have stabbed the assassin before he'd gotten off the shot.

Her shrewd gaze sliced him open, making him feel like his guts were slipping onto the floor. "When Bev told me what she did for a living, I kept my mouth shut, but that doesn't stop me worrying about her. I'll never tell her how much I worry, because I wouldn't want her to be anyone other than who she is. You saved her from having to step in front of a bullet tonight and I'm terribly grateful to you for that."

Dozens of stray thoughts collected in Will's brain and he finally made the connection. "You're Fred."

Her smile was as affectionate as her exasperated sigh. "Fredrica, actually. Fredrica Lounds. Everyone else calls me Freddie, but Bev loves to mess with people."

Her warmth was infectious and Will easily returned her smile. "It's good to finally meet you, Freddie. Beverly has been very cryptic about your relationship and now I understand why." He paused, waiting until wariness crept into her expression, then continued, "If everyone knew what a knockout she was dating, she'd have to constantly fight off suitors vying for your attention. And vice versa."

Freddie blushed as beautifully as Beverly, dropping his hand to press a palm to her cheek. "She warned me you were a flirt, Mr. Graham."

"Will, please," he corrected her. "And I wouldn't dare encroach on her territory." He felt his own face heat up in embarrassment as he thought of Hannibal upstairs, waiting for him.

Freddie's smile was knowing but she didn't say a word, which Will appreciated. "Bev's going to be fine," she answered his initial question finally. "The bullet was through and through, but nothing vital was hit. She'll be up and about in a week or so."

Relief washed over him. "Thanks. That's great to hear. Tell her I asked after her, okay?"

"I will," Freddie promised him with a smile. "Good night, Will."

His smile was distracted as anticipation returned with a vengeance. "Good night, Freddie."

He imagined he could feel the pull of Hannibal's arousal guiding him up the stairs, smiling when he saw Hannibal waiting at the entrance to his study. "Not going to let me see the master bedroom?" he teased as he drew nearer, seeing a mirror of his anticipation in Hannibal's gaze.

“It’s not a matter of keeping you from it,” Hannibal assured him as he opened the door to the study, then his hidden bedroom. Before Will was across the threshold to the bedroom, Hannibal caught him up in a breathtaking kiss. “But I will take no chances with interruptions tonight.”

“Good,” Will stated, fisting his hands in the back of Hannibal’s fine wool jacket to steady himself. His mind was going in a thousand directions at once, his need to get Hannibal naked and his fear that he wouldn’t be enough to satisfy Hannibal and he wanted to *devour* Hannibal’s mouth…but one thought overrode all others.

He looked deep into Hannibal’s eyes, studying every minute expression as he asked, “What are the rules of sleeping with the Head of a Family?”

Amusement, that ever-present fondness, a trace of annoyance, a flicker of uncertainty, then understanding softened Hannibal’s features. “In here, I am not the Head of the Family. In here, I am a man, the same as you. You are free to make any request of me, as I am free to make any request of you. All requests can be refused without censure.” Hannibal’s hand came to rest against Will’s neck again, thumb stroking along his jaw. “I meant what I said. I hold no expectations for tonight other than mutual pleasure.”

The sensation of Hannibal’s thumb brushing against his jaw raced down to his dick, alighting everything inside him with hunger. “I want you naked,” Will demanded before sealing his mouth over Hannibal’s, feeling the impatient tugs against his clothes as he shoved Hannibal’s jacket to the floor. He stripped the tie violently from Hannibal’s collar, earning a snarl and rough hands tugging off his jacket.

Will’s enthusiasm dwindled as his fingers traced the leather of Hannibal’s shoulder holster, breaking the kiss to murmur, “It doesn’t suit you.”

Will felt his holster being pulled down his arms, warm breath against his cheek as Hannibal replied, “Nor you.”

As their guns were placed on the small table, Will’s mind flashed back to the assassin, pistol in his palm, not a step away from Hannibal. A sickening lurch of his gut sent his arousal spiraling into disgust. “I could have shot him. It didn’t even occur to me until just now. I stood there like an idiot, watching him approach you from behind and couldn’t even *speak*.”

Will reluctantly allowed his head to be tilted upward but refused to meet Hannibal’s eyes. He fixated on Hannibal’s chin as it moved, shame heating his face.

“Your actions saved me. It might have been more expedient to have simply shot him, but you aren’t a man who would shoot someone in the back. You prefer to face your enemy, as do I.” Will swallowed the lump in his throat as Hannibal’s hand smoothed over his hair. “I would have been highly suspicious if you had instinctually reached for your gun after so little training. Did you intend to use your knife?” Hannibal asked.

Will closed his eyes and gave a short shake of his head, unwilling to see Hannibal’s disappointment. “I didn’t think of it until after,” he berated himself. “All I saw was the danger you were in and feared that I wouldn’t get to you in time.”

A hard, demanding kiss claimed his mouth, startling him with its intensity. Will returned it, smoothing his hands over Hannibal's broad shoulders. When his lips were released with great reluctance, he stared in amazement at Hannibal's open, proud expression. "You're not disappointed in my actions?"

Fingers tightened in his hair and along his hip, the quick flash of annoyance reminding him that he was speaking to his *Don* and he lowered his gaze respectfully.

"Will." Hannibal's tone was clearly an order, so Will looked up into the hint of displeasure in Hannibal's eyes. "You uncovered Deogracias' plot to assassinate me. Tonight you noticed the would-be assassin that all my other guards missed. When will you learn," Will sucked in a breath as fingers tightened in his hair and pulled his head back, Hannibal looking as feral as his reputation, "that you have become invaluable to me?"

The lust that raced down Will's spine had little to do with Hannibal's declaration. Traces of darkness that Will had only glimpses of before were bleeding through Hannibal's civil mask, possessive and pleased and *hungry*. That hunger threatened to topple every one of Will's defenses, leaving him open and vulnerable, and a part of him wanted that. Wanted to stop fighting himself and give in. "Fuck me," he pleaded quietly.

Only the strangled sound of their breathing disturbed the air for several heartbeats, then everything became a frantic whirl of emotion and action. Will's shirt was stripped from his shoulders and thrown onto the floor, Hannibal's kiss even more intense than before. Will made swift work of Hannibal's vest and shirt, kissing along the roughened skin of Hannibal's jaw as he removed the last barriers to Hannibal's chest.

As his palms slid over the rough chest hair, time slowed once again and he marveled at the curls wrapping around his fingers. As he ducked down to flick his tongue over a nipple, his thumb found the other one and rubbed in small circles, feeling the small hitches of breath beneath his mouth.

As he pressed kisses up Hannibal's sternum to his neck, he felt the reverent touch of lips pressing to the bump on his forehead. Sighing quietly, Will tilted his head back as lips skirted over the bandage on his neck to the bruises on his shoulder, Hannibal continuing down his chest to flick a tongue against his nipple.

Will sank his fingers into Hannibal's hair, cradling his head and trying to remember how to breathe properly. It didn't matter what Hannibal said; Will *knew* whose teeth were worrying at his nipple; he *knew* who was pushing his trousers down his legs and whose hand was stroking his dick. He couldn't shut off the part of his brain that screamed at him that he was at the mercy of *Don Hannibal Lecter*.

And the lust that surged through him at that thought left him weak and desperate.

A spike of embarrassment pierced his arousal as his socks were removed and his secret money stash revealed, but Will was distracted by Hannibal slipping out of his trousers, revealing the dick Will had seen just the once. It was hard and leaking and Will's fingers automatically wrapped around it, stroking up to the tip.

He let Hannibal guide him onto the bed, lost in a swirling fog of desire, wanting to touch and taste and *see*, now that Hannibal was naked. Fingers tugged gently at the thick chest hair, earning him a low grunt of encouragement. The faint tang of cologne was sharp in his nose as he licked at the base of Hannibal's throat, breathing in the darker musk that was pure *Hannibal*. Palms pressed up the strongly muscled back, then fingernails dragged down the flexing spine as Hannibal's mouth and teeth mapped his skin. Hannibal's eyes were almost black, his loosened hair framing his shadowed face.

Will felt drunk as he arched up into Hannibal's dick alongside his aching one, needing more friction than the gentle brush of their stomachs. Hannibal's ass was firm where he grabbed it for leverage, hooking his ankle around Hannibal's calf as he settled their hips against one another. He pressed his hips upward, bringing them into harder contact, feeling the rush of air against his skin as Hannibal groaned. Teeth were set against Will's jaw, hands rested next to his head and Hannibal matched his movements.

Tension sang in Will's veins, the taste of Hannibal's tongue against his, the scent of their sweat and the traces of precome easing their motion into a fluid glide. It was fast and desperate, both of them needing the affirmation of life from the other after such a close call.

Will's stomach lurched as the world turned upside down, bracing himself on Hannibal's chest and trying to catch his breath from the disorienting flip.

"I want to see you when you come," Hannibal declared, hands sliding to Will's ass and shifting him until their dicks bumped against each other.

Blindly, Will wrapped his hand around both their dicks, fear and desire battling for dominance as he tentatively began to stroke. He could feel each of Hannibal's fingers as they squeezed his ass, his whole body tensing when he felt his ass being spread and cool air touching him. He reflexively tightened his grip when a fingertip brushed over him, sending a shockwave of pleasure singing through his body, Hannibal's stuttered breath signaling his own spike of pleasure.

Emboldened, Will worked them harder, adding an aggressive twist of his wrist at the top of the stroke, causing his body to curl in on itself in pure *want*.

He lost himself in the darkness of Hannibal's eyes, desire and greed merging into a possessive glint that had Will's heart slamming against his chest. That Hannibal would want *him*…Will dug his sore palm into Hannibal's chest, the rush of pain merging with the pleasure, holding himself up as he felt his orgasm building. He worked his hand faster, his eyes begging Hannibal to come first.

Will only had an impression of Hannibal's pleasure before his own orgasm overwhelmed him.

Will's heart was still pounding in his ears as he pressed his nose to Hannibal's throat, draped over the rapidly rising and falling chest beneath him. Awareness of his legs stretched wide over Hannibal's thighs was quickly followed by a disconcerting sensation of vulnerability. Cool air over his bare back and ass caused gooseflesh to rise, intensifying the feeling of

vulnerability. His breath stilled as Hannibal's fingers spread possessively over his hip, sweat pooling everywhere their bodies touched.

The last of his euphoria was obliterated with his next breath: he'd asked Hannibal to fuck him.

He'd *begged* a man to *fuck him*…

Panic like he hadn't felt in years swept through him, every muscle tensing in anticipation of running, but Hannibal exerted just enough pressure to let Will know that he wasn't allowed to leave. "Please," he heard himself beg, his well-trained mind dredging up every trick at his disposal to placate an angry client.

It took Will several seconds of blind terror to realize that nothing was happening to him. Hannibal's hand had moved from his hip to soothe lightly up his back, retracing its slow movement down, and Will was unsettled to find himself relaxing into it.

Hannibal's voice was low and calm as he explained, "I am deeply moved that you would offer yourself to me, but I don't want your first experience clouded by indecision," without a trace of censure or disappointment.

Panic subsiding, Will raised his head from Hannibal's chest, Hannibal relaxing his hold until Will was able to push off of him completely. Embarrassment heated his neck and he rubbed at it self-consciously, gathering the courage to look at Hannibal.

Eyes half-closed, satisfaction in every line of his relaxed body, Hannibal continued, "Your body recoiled from my touch, light as it was. No matter how much you believe yourself to be ready, your body will always tell me the truth." As if to prove his point, Hannibal reached over and slid his hand along Will's inner high, fingertips tickling his balls.

Though he'd just come, Will felt himself arching into the touch, locking his gaze to Hannibal's, the ever-present fondness shining brightly. His thighs spread as Hannibal cupped him more firmly, sensitivity *just* skirting the edges of painful. His eyes slipped closed as Hannibal's ministrations coaxed his dick to begin to harden again.

When Hannibal's fingers abandoned his balls and pressed further back, Will's breath stuttered. When he blinked his eyes open, he was gripping Hannibal's wrist, stilling his movements.

A quick glance at Hannibal showed teasing mirth mingling with the fondness in his gaze. "Your reflexes are remarkable," Hannibal praised him, easing his hand out of Will's grip. "When the day comes that you welcome my touch, I'll fulfill every desire you possess. Until then, I will exploit every pleasure point on your body to exhaustion."

To salvage some of his pride and distract himself from the heat of embarrassment still climbing his neck, Will challenged, "Not if I find all of yours first."

Chuckling, Hannibal pushed himself upright then rolled off the bed, heading toward the bathroom.

Will let out a shaky breath and fell back on the bed, throwing his arm over his eyes. He deliberately blanked his mind, not wanting to deal with his fucked-up emotional state. He stayed immobile until a warm cloth slid over his abdomen, sliding his hand over Hannibal's and directing the cloth to his dick.

Only when Hannibal pulled away did Will remove his arm from his eyes, just in time to see Hannibal returning to the bathroom. He curled on his side, enjoying the flex of muscles as Hannibal rejoined him on the bed, turning to face him.

Drowning in the softness of Hannibal's gaze, Will shifted closer and brought their lips together in a brief kiss. Hannibal reciprocated with a brush of barely-there pressure, Will chasing after him to prolong the kiss.

They traded slowly deepening kisses, Will's hand finally curling around Hannibal's neck and thumbing along his jaw, not allowing him to pull away again. Desire was slow to build, more a gradual warmth than the raging inferno that had started their evening. When he sensed Hannibal was ready, Will brought Hannibal off with his hand, kissing him through his orgasm.

His mouth was abandoned as Hannibal slipped down the bed to settle himself between Will's thighs. He forgot how to breathe as Hannibal's tongue tormented him again and again, holding him at the edge as surely as Hannibal's hands held him down.

When Hannibal swallowed him deep into his throat, Will nearly blacked out, his fingers digging into Hannibal's shoulders as his orgasm seemed to go on forever.

He didn't know how long he was incoherent, or how long his orgasm actually lasted, but his muscles felt as limp as a dishrag and he still wasn't breathing properly. He focused on the skin-colored blur inches from his nose, realizing it was Hannibal's neck.

As of sensing his return to consciousness, Hannibal mused, "I didn't mean to break you."

Annoyance filtered through his lethargy and Will stretched languidly, brushing his limbs against Hannibal as sensually as he could, listening for the unsteadiness in Hannibal's breath. "I was still recovering from my first orgasm," he retaliated, fingertips stroking lightly along Hannibal's chest. "Simply lightheaded from the lack of blood to my brain."

Hannibal's chuckle rumbled through both their chests, Will enjoying the feeling through his fingers. "You never give an inch to anyone, do you?"

Will was too lighthearted and satiated to have a serious conversation, but he muttered, "Just you," into Hannibal's skin, feeling more than hearing when the implication registered with Hannibal.

Arms tightened around him, and warmed from their closeness and his exhaustion, Will felt his eyes slip closed and drifted to sleep.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Hannibal ends the war decisively, but loses a much bigger battle with Will.

Tags: Canon-Typical Violence

It had been hinted by more than one of his lieutenants that Hannibal should be grateful that the war wasn't escalating. Only ten dead in total since the assassin was thwarted by Will, split evenly between the two Families.

Hannibal would never be *grateful* at the killing of those under his protection, no matter that he'd dealt an equal blow to Hobbs. He detested the hesitation of Hobbs' attacks, merely a vulture pecking at the entrails of the nearly dead, insistent and numbing.

It made Hannibal long for the days of his father's rule, bloodshed in the open streets in broad daylight, daring everyone to take note of the victor and cower at their strength.

This…nibbling at his Organization needed to end, *now*. He'd been up for three nights straight, trying to figure out a way into Hobbs' House to slit his throat while he slept. Drawing Hobbs out of his House had proven futile, as the cowardly man surrounded himself with his guards when he stepped outside. Not even Hannibal's best sharpshooter had been able to get a clean shot from the rooftop across from Hobbs' house, succeeding in wounding one man and killing a second before being taken out, himself.

Hobbs had only one weakness, and his daughter was under such heavy guard that Hannibal's people reported not being able to see her when she was escorted to her classes.

Add in Crawford's nearly daily presence on his doorstep and Hannibal was ready to burn the city down to find some peace.

Hannibal sensed someone hovering just outside the door to his study, but knew instinctually who it would be. Only Will dared be in his presence when he was deep in thought, his lieutenants well-trained to avoid him unless called upon.

He didn't acknowledge the silent entrance or Will slipping into the chair opposite him, intent on the blueprint he'd secured of Hobbs' House, looking for a vulnerability. After several minutes of futilely attempting to ignore Will's steady contemplation, Hannibal let out an irritated sigh and fell back in his chair. "Do you have anything worthwhile to contribute?" he threatened with a hard edge to his words.

Holding his gaze, undeterred by his threat, Will leaned forward and placed a newspaper clipping on top of the blueprints. "You can get Abigail Hobbs Saturday night."

Hannibal barely glanced at the advertisement for a collegiate dance, dismissing it with a flick of his finger. “Hobbs wouldn’t be so careless.”

Will’s entire being was somber, a slight hesitance in his words capturing Hannibal’s attention despite his irritation. “Hobbs won’t know she’s out of the house until she’s at the dance. He doesn’t understand that she’s nineteen with a will of her own. She’s not going to let her father’s war dictate her life.”

Annoyance flared bright and hot, Hannibal barely able to contain it as he digested Will’s words. “Have you been following her?”

Unexpected sadness filled Will’s eyes as he said quietly, “I was seventeen when I left Crawford’s house for the last time. He couldn’t relate to me, even after living with me for three years. Hobbs hasn’t fared any better with Abigail, still thinking of her as hanging on his leg when she was little, not a young woman trying to carve out her own place in the world.”

Hannibal’s nerves settled as he realized Will didn’t need to follow Abigail to understand her. His imagination was uniquely qualified in uncovering her desires and motivations.

Before he could say anything, Will was on his feet, refusing to look at him as he said, “I’ll help capture her if you wish, but may I make one request? I’d prefer not to know what you do to her once you have her.”

Hannibal was left in the silence of his study, Will’s remorseful comment ringing uneasily inside his head.

It was not that he was without compassion. It was distasteful to him that he needed to kill one so young, but Abigail Hobbs was no innocent bystander. She was the daughter of his enemy and had actively taken part in her father’s Business. She had carried the money from Deogracias to Hobbs, knowing full well what it was buying. She was Hobbs’ Achilles heel and Hannibal’s need to end the war quickly outweighed any hesitation he may have on the manner in which he ended it.

Hannibal contemplated sending pieces of her back to Hobbs. Staging her death and holding her captive indefinitely. For several hours, he envisioned turning her against her father, offering her a place within his Organization, high enough to be considered important but without any real power.

What he chose was to slit her throat while she was still unconscious from the chloroform, her blood running into the washtub beneath the embalming table in the lean-to. It was swift and painless, the only comfort he could offer her. When she had bled out, he washed the body, sewed the wound closed and redressed her, so she looked merely asleep.

When Zeller knocked, he waited a respectful minute before announcing that Hobbs was on the phone. Calm determination settled over Hannibal as he put on his jacket and strode into the house, picking up the receiver. “Lecter.”

Without preamble, the distraught, raging voice of Hobbs screeched, “*Where’s my fucking daughter*?”

“It’s quite rude not to introduce yourself before beginning a telephone conversation, Mr. Hobbs,” Hannibal intoned gravely. “It’s also rude to suggest that I would know the whereabouts of your daughter.”

Hobbs grew more incensed, sounding like he was spitting into the receiver. “Tier saw your people grab her from the dance! *What did you do with her*?”

Corralling his irritation, Hannibal dismissively remarked, “Strung her up like a cow, sliced her open and removed her organs. I had a taste for kidney pie tonight and needed fresh meat.”

Rather than the expected incensed meltdown, silence grew oppressive from the other end of the phone. When Hobbs spoke, his voice was low and threatening, a new note to it that sent a thrill up Hannibal’s spine. Perhaps, finally, he’d forced a confrontation between them.

“Next time you see me, it’ll be after I’ve killed every one of your lieutenants.” Hannibal’s eyes lit up in delight, only for ice to plunge through his veins at Hobbs’ next words. “Your little fuck boy won’t die quickly, Lecter. He disrespected Tier and killed Stammets…or did you think I’d forgotten?” A ragged breath. “A pound of flesh, isn’t that the saying? My men are taking their pound of flesh and when they’re done, Tier will make Graham pay for fucking his girl. Good luck finding the body.”

The line went dead and Hannibal slowly lowered the receiver to the cradle. Hobbs was lying, of course. Will had been on the mission with Brown and Zeller to fetch the girl. Upon their return, Zeller had carried her in while Brown held the door and watched his back. And Will… Will had been…

Why couldn’t he remember where Will had been?

Zeller was standing halfway down the hall, discreetly affording him privacy while he’d been on the phone. Hannibal slowly released his white-knuckled grip on the receiver and directed his question down the hall. “Where did Graham and Brown go after you brought the girl here?”

Despite the carefully neutral tone of his voice, Zeller seemed to sense the urgency of Hannibal’s request. “I’ll find them now, sir,” he promised, already heading toward the stairs.

Hannibal allowed himself a brief moment to admire Zeller’s dedication, then set the full power of his mind to the problem at hand.

It had only been an hour since the girl was brought to him, a total of three hours since the start of the mission. Hobbs’ house was nearly two hours away. In order to kidnap Will and take him back to the house, Hobbs would have already had to be in the city, known that his daughter was going to the dance, known she’d been kidnapped and known Will was involved. Will would’ve had to have been separated from Zeller and Brown after their return to the house with the girl. The odds of all of that happening were astronomical.

Upon further reflection, Hobbs hadn’t mentioned any new deaths, only Stammets. Hannibal had seen the damage Will could do when threatened and knew without a doubt that Will

would rather die fighting than allow himself to be captured. For Will to not have injured or killed a single one of Hobbs' men was inconceivable.

All in all, Hobbs had to be lying. But the smallest part of Hannibal remained apprehensive.

An agonizing 45 minutes later, Hannibal was nursing a bourbon in his parlor when the front door opened and in walked Will and Brown, dusty and unharmed. The weary grimace froze on Will's face as he sensed Hannibal's stare, Hannibal's grip on his glass loosening as the scent of gunpowder wafted to him.

Will's mouth worked but he didn't say anything, a small frown pulling down the corners. Brown was oblivious to Hannibal mood, but a furrow creased Will's forehead as he returned Hannibal's scrutiny, searching for a clue to Hannibal's mood.

"Training again?" Hannibal remarked quietly, glancing at the stains on Will's hand and cuff.

Will's eyes narrowed minutely and his lips thinned, clearly trying to suss out what had changed since the mission. Hannibal kept his emotions under tight control, offering Will nothing.

Hannibal's attention was drawn to Brown, whose joviality was in stark contrast to the exhaustion radiating from Will. "Yeah, Will's been practicing with moving targets. That old tire swing is getting a workout." Brown smiled at Will, squeezing Will's shoulder and letting his hand remain. The flicker of irritation and resignation that crossed Will's face at the touch was quickly smoothed away under a mask of indifference, but the alarms that went off in Hannibal's mind weren't to be ignored.

Hannibal addressed Brown but looked straight at Will, gauging his reaction. "And has Mr. Graham been improving?"

Will bristled at being talked about rather than asked directly, but the irritation in his eyes was solely for Brown, who leaned in closer and curled his arm over Will's shoulders. "He's been steadily improving under my guidance, but he needs a firm hand to direct him."

Hannibal's gaze slid to Brown. "I've found the best teachers use a hands-off approach, giving their students instructions but letting them succeed on their own."

Incredulously, Brown still had his arm draped over Will's shoulders, completely blind to the veiled threat. To Will's credit, not once did he tense or flinch from the touch, instead holding himself casually still, letting his eyes broadcast his rage.

Hannibal met that rage head-on, acknowledging it with a small nod. He stood up from the couch, draining the last of his bourbon. "Will," he addressed his lover directly for the first time, "Did you notice anyone watching you at the college or on the way here?"

Confusion mingled with curiosity, then Will replayed the evening's activities inside his mind's eye, his retreat inward always a fascinating thing to witness. Brown had never seen Will use his gift and it was clear that it held no meaning for him, unlike Hannibal, who appreciated the insights Will could present.

“Some unease as we were getting Abigail into the car, but I couldn’t sense anyone watching us with sinister intent,” Will replied, eyes begging Hannibal to explain his odd behavior.

“Mr. Hobbs is aware his daughter is missing and he claims that Mr. Tier saw you abduct her,” Hannibal relented, his mood souring the longer Brown kept his hand on Will. “His claims after that were inaccurate, to say the least.”

Will caught on to Hannibal’s meaning quickly, eyes widening in shock then narrowing in calculated anger.

“I didn’t see anybody,” Brown casually interjected into their silent conversation, Hannibal mentally dismissing him as Will sank back into his recreation of the evening.

“Tier was the one Abigail confided in,” Will pronounced softly. “She bribed him to take her to the dance. He was supposed to pick her up afterward, but she wasn’t at the designated spot. When he couldn’t find her, he called Hobbs and said he’d seen us take her, rather than admit that it was his fault Abigail was out in the open without guards.” Will’s gaze snapped to Hannibal’s. “Did he give you names?”

Hannibal instantly recollected the conversation he had with Hobbs. “No, he said Tier saw my people take her. He named no one.”

Will nodded sharply once, his expression set in hard lines. “Hobbs made threats,” he said, his eyes softening in understanding.

Yes, Will understood that the threats had been made against him. Where Brown’s confusion was an unwelcome hindrance, Will’s intuitive knowledge meant that Hannibal didn’t have to waste time on explanations and could focus on a plan of action.

“Preposterous lies,” Hannibal corrected him, sending Will a tiny, dangerous smirk. Hobbs would pay for everything, not just with his life, but his entire Family would suffer for following such an insipid man. “Mr. Brown, I thank you for your service tonight,” he dismissed his lieutenant, counting the seconds until Brown removed his hand from Will’s shoulder.

Brown looked hopefully at Will, but Will was staring intently at Hannibal, waiting until they were alone to ask the questions burning in his eyes. Finally sensing he was unwanted, Brown left the house, Hannibal waiting until the click of the door before advancing on Will.

Cupping Will’s face, Hannibal devoured his mouth, dimly aware that Will was pliant and submissive, letting him take whatever it was he needed.

When he felt in control again, Hannibal released Will’s mouth but stroked his thumbs over Will’s cheeks, noticing the fine lines of exhaustion so up close. “What has Brown done?”

“She’s dead,” Will stated dully, deflecting the conversation away from what had just transpired. “When will Hobbs find out?”

Hannibal wanted to press Will for answers, but Family matters took precedence. “If he believed my embellishment when we conversed, then he already knows.” He would not apologize for doing what was necessary, but the faintly haunted look in Will’s eyes unnerved him. “I did nothing further to the body,” he promised, wanting to alleviate the pain Will was attempting to conceal. “I’ll arrange a meeting with one of Hobbs’ men to return her.”

“*No*.” Will’s insistence was gruff and immediate, hands tightening at Hannibal’s waist. “He said he had me, didn’t he?” Hannibal let his gaze drop the slightest bit, but it was enough confirmation for Will. "He said he’d fucked me, or let his men fuck me, then he’d leave me for you to find.”

“I knew he was lying,” Hannibal dismissed, ignoring the small part of himself that believed, if only for a moment. “He only spoke of Stammets’ death, no others. No mention of injuries, though I know how dangerous you can be.”

Will ignored his praise, focusing all his energy into digging his fingertips into Hannibal’s waistcoat. “I want to take her home.”

Hannibal’s vision whited out for a second, pressure on his wrists bringing his attention to his hands that were tightening around Will’s throat. He immediately loosened his grip, shocked at his own behavior.

He braced himself for Will’s wrath, but all he received was a rueful smile. “I’m your weakness, Hannibal.” Will held no condemnation toward him, no fear. Only acceptance and understanding. “If anyone other than me shows up, Hobbs will keep coming at you until he wears you down. I know this war is only a few months along, but I can see how it’s draining you. You're a man of action and Hobbs is denying you that action.”

“I would lay waste to all he possesses,” Hannibal growled, still in disbelief at how well Will *knew* him. “I would grind his Family to dust and erase their name from history.”

It was Will who kissed him this time, all teeth and tongue and hunger. “I want to see that,” Will breathed against his mouth. “I want to see you rain destruction down on those who threaten you. Threaten this Family.” Their eyes locked, Will’s burning with an intensity that Hannibal felt at the very center of his being. “Let me do this for you. Let me lure Hobbs into a trap. I promise to leave you his heart.”

“It’s not his heart that I desire,” he whispered, once again claiming Will’s mouth in a deep, sensual kiss.

They retired to Hannibal’s hidden bedroom where Hannibal brought Will to a quick orgasm, breathing his fill of damp skin overlaid with sexual fulfillment.

He groaned when Will rolled him onto his back, wholly unprepared for Will’s relentless focus, mapping out every inch of skin with fingers and lips, methodical in his approach. Hannibal twitched restlessly, hands eager to guide Will but reluctant to disturb Will’s enjoyment.

And Will was enjoying himself. The satisfied smile, the sure hands, the confident way he mouthed at Hannibal's erection, all spoke of Will's comfort in the dominant role. Hannibal allowed himself to succumb to Will's ministrations, letting his arousal be molded and shaped by Will until he was a shuddering, gasping mess beneath Will's teasing mouth.

They shared soft kisses and gentle touches, gradually relaxing into lightly dozing in each other's arms. When Will's breathing deepened and evened out, Hannibal slipped out of bed.

He dressed quickly and entered the hall, heading straight for the phone. He rang Hobbs, telling whoever answered, "This is Lecter. I'll trade the girl for Graham, but only to Hobbs. One hour, Port Deposit, Maryland. I'll be alone."

He collected the body from the lean-to and laid it across the back seat of one of his cars, waving away any help offered. "If anyone tries to come after me, even Will Graham, I'll kill them," he told Nunez, who looked pained but nodded his acquiesce.

He didn't know what to expect from Hobbs. If the man himself would show up or send a lackey. If Hobbs would kill someone who looked like Will to maintain the illusion or wouldn't bother with a body at all. If Hobbs would believe the lie that his daughter was merely drugged until Hannibal could get a clean shot off.

He was not unskilled with a gun, but it had been many years since he'd had to use it. Trying to conceal it from Hobbs and aiming blind would be difficult, but a wounded Hobbs could be dealt with.

Another car joined him moments after his arrival, and to Hannibal's delight, Hobbs had accompanied two of his men. A fourth body dragged from the backseat was bound hand and foot, head lolling as if it were unconscious. As the headlights illuminated the area, Hannibal could make out the blood-soaked clothing, really no more than rags hanging off the body. The hair wasn't curly nor short enough, but it was a fair approximation of Will.

Hannibal stepped out of his car, leaving the door open as he carefully pulled the body from the back, straightening so that Hobbs could get a good look. He hid the gun in the folds of her coat, the flat of his palm warming the metal.

Hobbs took a step forward before one of his men put a hand on his shoulder, reeling him back. "She's…dead? You really killed her?"

"I had to sedate her so she wouldn't attempt to jump out of the car," Hannibal explained, perfectly reasonable. Hobbs hadn't taken his eyes off of his daughter's face, so Hannibal dared a step forward, sensing the movement of hands going to guns in the darkness. "Is Graham alive?"

"Depends on how you define 'alive'," Hobbs answered after a few seconds, clearly trying to disorient him.

Hannibal ignored his goad, trying to make out faces through the blinding light. "Is Mr. Tier with you?" A subtle shift of the man to Hobbs' right was enough of a tell. "How did you enjoy Graham?"

“What?” The spluttered disgust allowed Hannibal to shift the gun, sliding his finger onto the trigger.

“I pay well for all of Graham’s services, though I greatly prefer his mouth. Rather talented tongue on that boy. Does he still have it?” Hannibal addressed Hobbs, opening his senses and letting his instinct take over. The three men were distracted, murmuring to themselves, letting their guard down as they tried to comprehend Hannibal’s nonchalance about Will. And they were ignoring the danger right in front of them.

Hannibal shifted the body to his shoulder, firing in rapid succession at the three shapes standing by the other car. A bullet ricocheted off the ground near his feet; one of the men had managed a shot as they fell.

“Don’t shoot!” Hobbs screamed, a rich thread of pain in his voice. “You’ll hit my daughter.”

Loud cursing and a muffled moan directed Hannibal’s next shots, silencing both. Ragged breathing brought him closer, finally standing over Hobbs who was bleeding from a wound in his shoulder. A gun was lying two feet from his clenched fist. The fake Will was lying on the ground on the other side of the car, but Hannibal didn’t believe for a minute that he was disabled in any capacity.

Hannibal let the body slide to the ground in front of Hobbs, the girl’s ashen color illuminated by the cars’ headlights. Hannibal’s gunshot silenced Hobbs mid-wail, swiftly turning to shoot at the noise he heard behind him.

The fake Will stumbled backward before falling to his death. Hannibal nudged all the bodies, making sure they were dead before climbing back into his car and making the long drive back home.

The Family was furious with him upon learning he’d gone alone to meet Hobbs, but it was Will’s icy glare that pierced his righteousness. Will would never dare say anything in front of the lieutenants, but Hannibal felt the weight of his stare during the briefing.

Killing Hobbs, his daughter, and Tier had gutted Hobbs’ Organization, and Hannibal needed to extend his offer of surrender to those who wanted to join his Organization as soon as possible.

Taking most of his lieutenants with him, Hannibal cast one last glance toward Will, silently fuming, before closing himself off to everything but duty.

About three quarters of Hobbs’ Organization pledged their fealty to Lecter House, the others were taken out and shot. Hobbs’ Organization was not large, nor was it particularly well-run. Hannibal left two of his best men in charge of restructuring after the mess had been cleaned up, only letting his guard down on the drive back to Baltimore.

He’d been working out a plan in the back of his mind since killing Hobbs. It would be painful, but it was the only way to ensure the safety of the Family. Hannibal had never expected to care as much as he did for his feisty chameleon. That left him vulnerable, and

while he'd been able to disregard it when it was still a theory, the reality of having someone who could be used to influence him was unacceptable.

Unacceptable and dangerous. As Head of the Family, Hannibal had to treat everyone equally. He'd put Will above his station, granted him courtesies not afforded to long-serving Family. Favoritism could lead to dissent within the ranks and Hannibal now controlled three territories. He couldn't afford the luxury of a lover within the Organization.

Hannibal didn't have to look far before finding Will, sitting in the semi-dark of the study staring at a glass of whiskey. "I know what you're going to say," Will began without preamble, surprising Hannibal with the bitterness and resignation flowing from him.

"Interpreting the evidence?" he lobbed back, just as sharply, knowing that if he'd come to the conclusion that he and Will couldn't be together, then Will would have, too.

The whiskey was finished in one swallow. Will rose unsteadily to his feet, his eyes dull and lifeless as he looked toward Hannibal, but didn't meet his gaze. "Brown wants to fuck me."

It was so far removed from what Hannibal had been prepared to hear that he stood motionless, barely breathing, waiting for Will to continue.

Will rubbed at his neck, his exhale shaky. "He's wanted me since you brought me into the Family. He's a lieutenant and…he's not you." Will met his eyes then and Hannibal felt himself drowning in the sorrow reflected back at him. "If either of us are compromised, we can be replaced. You can't."

Despite coming to a similar conclusion, Hannibal wanted to protest. Ending their relationship didn't mean that Will had to immediately take up with someone else. Brown was not a conversationalist: Will craved stimulation of the mind, needed it as much as Hannibal did. "This sacrifice is beneath you," he said, biting back other words he would regret.

Will's dismissive shrug raised the hairs along the back of Hannibal's neck. This wasn't Will making a choice; this was Will *compromising*. "You aren't a whore needing protection," Hannibal growled, his shocking words having the desired effect.

Will stalked over to him, infuriated and flushed. "I'll fuck whoever I want to fuck, *Don Lecter*," Will sneered, offering a mock half-bow.

Will's footsteps echoed with his retreat, Hannibal both proud and enraged at Will's devotion to him. Never had he felt more dissatisfied at getting exactly what he wanted.

Trying to close off his emotions, Hannibal set himself the task of cleaning his weapon, removing all trace of it having been fired. The methodical, practiced motions calmed him, but their heated exchange replayed in his mind throughout the night, regret thickening his throat and stinging his eyes.

The last thing Hannibal wanted to do was talk to the FBI, but the whole House was woken up at seven to Agent Crawford laying on the doorbell and pounding on the door. Not bothering

to dress, Hannibal pulled on his robe and instructed everyone to leave the main floor before he opened the door.

“You killed Hobbs,” Crawford declared as he pushed past Hannibal to stand in the center of the foyer, eyes taking in every corner of the room.

Hannibal stared at the irritant invading his home at the crack of dawn, imagining blood spraying from his slit throat and gushing down his eviscerated chest. “Did I?” he questioned, keeping his tone neutral. It wouldn’t do to goad Crawford; the man was relentless if provoked and Hannibal was in a poor frame of mind to defend himself properly.

“Hobbs, his daughter and one of his top men were found dead near the river in Port Deposit, along with an unidentified man. All were killed sometime between eleven and one.” Crawford leaned into him, narrowing his eyes. “Your people have set up at Hobbs’ place.”

Hannibal didn’t deny or confirm it, simply leveled his gaze at Crawford, daring him to look away first. Crawford did, but not before nodding his head slowly, as if Hannibal had given him all the answers he needed.

“Your false alibis won’t save you this time, Lecter. There will be evidence at the crime scene. My people are sifting through dirt and sand, logging every footprint and tire track, every blood drop, and we will find proof that you were there.” Crawford leaned in closer, their noses almost touching before he angled his head to whisper in Hannibal’s ear, “Abigail Hobbs’ throat was stitched closed after it was slit. No other mob boss on the East Coast has surgical knowledge.”

While that was certainly true, Hannibal’s stitches *were* surgical, and therefore, could have been performed by any licensed doctor. As Hannibal had only had one year of medical school training, he technically wasn’t qualified, which Crawford knew.

This was a fishing expedition, nothing more, and Hannibal was growing weary of Crawford’s empty threats. “Is that all, Agent Crawford?” he asked, not bothering to hide that weariness.

Crawford backed away to eye him shrewdly, an uncertain tilt of his head stirring Hannibal’s curiosity. “Until I return with a search warrant,” Crawford threatened, giving him one more penetrating stare before seeing himself out.

Hannibal stared at the space Crawford had vacated, knowing nothing would be found at the scene to link him to the deaths. None of the blood was his and the wind would carry away any hairs or fibers. Anything else would be circumstantial and no judge wanted to confront a Family without infallible proof.

He roused himself as brilliant red and orange sunlight streaked across the rug. Attempting further sleep was futile, so Hannibal asked for coffee to be brought into the parlor. He idly pressed random keys on his harpsichord as his cup grew cold, the disjointed sounds matching his emotions.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Beverly reveals a truth Will isn't ready for, and Will starts up a romance with Matthew.

Tags for this chapter: Will Graham/Matthew Brown, Explicit Sexual Content.

Seeing Hannibal *hurt*, so Will limited his exposure. Where before he would spend his days at the House, now he forced himself to explore his new neighborhood. He used the public library rather than Hannibal's collection. He avoided the art museums and theater.

He wilted like a plant denied sunlight, his mind dulling as he restricted himself to the duties he was assigned.

At least one positive thing came of his self-imposed exile: Matthew noticed the change in him. Will no longer avoided Matthew's touch, but neither did he encourage it. It simply was, and that seemed to be enough affection for Matthew, at least for the time being. Will sensed the underlying need growing and dreaded the day Matthew actively pursued him.

Will didn't want another man's hands touching his body. Hannibal hadn't merely touched him, he had *possessed* him. Made him *feel*, after being disassociated from his emotions for so long. Made him want to compromise himself.

Matthew would never get that chance. Will didn't trust him, not fully, and Will would never let his guard down when they were alone.

In desperation, Will asked Beverly to resume their weekly chess game, anything to occupy his mind and stop imagining what he would never have again. It would keep him in the House a few extra hours, but the odds of seeing Hannibal were slim. Hannibal didn't associate with his people beyond the lieutenants. Will had been the exception.

"You've been wanting to say something for the past half hour," Will groused as he moved his pawn.

Beverly didn't look up from the board but Will saw the tension ease along her shoulders. "He's gotten colder."

It hurt like it was intended to, but Will bottled it up and buried it with the rest of his feelings about Hannibal. "So have I," he quipped, letting heat filter into his voice.

"I know why…and I know it's important," Beverly started, then stared at him until Will looked up at her. "I don't like seeing either of you like this."

Will had to harden himself against the onslaught of emotion her words dredged up, taking slow, deep breaths to center himself. “It’s either this or the destruction of the Family,” he said. “There is no middle ground.”

Beverly was silent, stunned by his reaction, then her expression softened in understanding. “You can’t leave him.”

“I can’t leave the Family,” Will bit back, harsh and unyielding.

Beverly’s wistful, sad smile rattled him, but it was her next observation that undid him: “You love him.”

The emotional floodgate burst open, robbing Will of his breath. He’d never dared let himself think it, tried so hard to cling to the belief that Hannibal wasn’t his entire world. “I can’t,” he choked out, burying his head in his hands. “I won’t let it be true. It’s *not* true.” He fought back the ache that threatened to cave in his chest. It was destructive and perfect and he couldn’t *have* it. “It’ll kill us both.”

Beverly’s touch was like fire against his hand, pulling it away from his face. “It *is* killing both of you,” she snapped. ‘You’re stronger together.”

“I’m a liability,” Will spat bitterly, yanking his hand out of Beverly’s. “Dons can’t have weaknesses.”

Her penetrating stare narrowed in shock. “You would slowly kill yourself to protect the Family?”

His laugh was bitter and cold, a sound not unlike what a dying man would make. “My life belongs to the Family, but how I give it is my choice.” He knocked his king off the board. “We're done.”

He had no room for guilt at how he’d treated Beverly, so consumed by his love for Hannibal.

Love, where he’d only felt it’s fleeting graze in an adulterous bed. In the shine of green eyes after the most intimate of embraces. In the choice being given to him for the first time in his life.

Will stumbled into his apartment and locked the door, leaning against it, needing the strength of the building to hold himself up. His chest ached, his head swam, and his thoughts were a never-ending loop of every interaction he’d ever had with Hannibal. From that first glimpse at the opera to the last bitter taste flooding his mouth, to the devastation reflected back at him with their last conversation as lovers. To the distant coldness when he had to be in Hannibal’s presence now.

His only comfort was that it was killing Hannibal, too. Hannibal was too controlled for anyone but him to see it, but it was there, in the slight slump of Hannibal’s normally perfect posture. In the restlessness of his fingers. In the lost focus after everyone had filed out of the room after a meeting.

Will spent the next several hours putting his armor back in place, carefully sealing off his feelings for Hannibal. He had training with Matthew in the morning and he needed to accept the man's offer of having a bite afterward.

It was time to move on. No matter how much it hurt.

His mouth stretched unnaturally in a smile at Matthew's invitation to lunch, but Matthew didn't notice. Matthew's delight was painful to watch, but Will offered another smile and suggested a diner in the heart of the city. The more Families that saw him with someone who wasn't Hannibal, the better.

Matthew was none the wiser, not that he looked at anyone other than Will. Matthew flattered and flirted, reminding Will of the men who wanted to buy him. The connection disgusted him, but he preened under the flattery and returned the light squeeze to his hand, *needing* to make this work.

"I want to kiss you." The blunt announcement was low enough that it didn't travel from their booth, but Will's gaze swept the diner, looking for eavesdroppers.

Sensing no one paying them extra attention, he smiled minutely but shook his head. "Not here."

He knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as it left his mouth. Matthew's eyes lit up and he leaned in closer, whispering, "My place is a few blocks from here."

Will wasn't prepared to fend off sexual advances in Matthew's domain, but neither did he want Matthew in his apartment. Thinking quickly, he placed his hand over Matthew's and suggested, "How about a movie?"

The lure of a darkened theater won out and Will found himself seated near the back against the wall, trying not think of being boxed in. The handful of other couples were spread out, seeking their own bubble of privacy.

As soon as the lights went down, Matthew's arm went around him. Will placed his hand just below Matthew's knee, squeezing in encouragement. When he lowered his head and turned, Matthew was staring at his mouth, so he parted his lips in encouragement.

A too-eager tongue invaded his mouth and Will brought his hand to Matthew's cheek, guiding him to a gentler kiss. As he subtly manipulated his date, Matthew relaxed into him, following his lead.

Will lost himself to the heat and slick, give and take, until Matthew's hand strayed to his upper thigh.

"No," he breathed, breaking the kiss but keeping his hold on Matthew's neck. "Not yet."

Matthew was nonplussed. "Okay," he agreed, then covered Will's mouth in a sloppy, disgusting kiss.

Will's grimace was lost to the domination Matthew was forcing on him, resorting to scratching his nails along the back of Matthew's neck to get him to stop.

"Shit," Matthew hissed, but instead of the expected anger, Will was dragged into an even harder kiss, forced to press against Matthew's invading tongue or be choked by it.

Will's stomach twisted violently, threatening to expel the meal they'd just shared. A switch flipped in his mind as he analyzed everything he knew about Matthew, everything he was currently experiencing and came to a sickening realization.

Matthew was trying to emulate Hannibal, subduing Will as he'd imagined Hannibal had done. Matthew wanted to be just like Hannibal, but he only saw the powerful Head of the Family, not the man hidden away. Only Will had that privilege and he wouldn't betray Hannibal's trust in him. He couldn't let Matthew know what Hannibal was truly like, but neither could he let Matthew believe he liked to be dominated.

When Will felt teeth sink into his lower lip, he let out a muffled cry, shoving at Matthew's shoulders. His mind slipped into defensive mode, preparing his body to attack.

His red haze faded as he realized Matthew had released him and shrunk back into his seat.

Adrenaline still rushing through his veins, Will touched his tender, swollen lip. "What the hell?" he asked, letting loose with the full power of his confusion and anger.

He had no sympathy for Matthew's spluttering excuses. "Lecter…he. He's always in control. I wanted to give you what he did. I thought you liked it."

"If that's what you think, then you don't know me at all," Will hissed, fixing his cold gaze on Matthew. "This was a mistake. I'm leaving."

"I'm sorry. Please." The simpering fool looked like he was about to drop to his knees at Will's feet. "I just want you so much. I lost my head. I never wanted to hurt you."

"I'm not with him anymore," he reminded Matthew with a hard stare. "Why would you want to be just like him, if I left him?"

The logic seemed to defy Matthew and Will felt a bubble of pity rise up. The man had no personal boundaries, hence the constant touches despite the clear evidence that Will and Hannibal were involved. Matthew had a very simple view of the world and Will should have anticipated Matthew's misconception of his and Hannibal's relationship.

Matthew finally seemed to understand his illogical conclusions and asked meekly, "What do you want?"

Will blew out his aggravation in a sigh. "I wish you'd asked me that at the start of our date."

Matthew's hand twitched as if it wanted to touch him, but it remained in his lap. "I'm asking now. Please don't condemn me for not knowing how to please you."

Will's conscience battled with his need to protect Hannibal. Matthew genuinely cared for him and to seduce him would be ridiculously easy. But could he keep it up for weeks, months? Years? He couldn't predict Matthew's reaction to a break up, but if Matthew misconstrued the dynamics of his and Hannibal's relationship, what else had Matthew gotten wrong?

Cautiously, slowly, Will let his body relax back into his seat, giving a short shake of his head when Matthew reached out to him. "I want to start over, without any preconceived notions about what either of us wants."

Matthew's expression changed from desolate to eager anticipation in the blink of an eye. "Thank you."

Matthew's fingers twitched again and Will offered his hand, a silent gesture of forgiveness. Matthew's fingers curled around his own, gentle pressure accompanied by an affectionate smile.

Will returned the smile automatically, training his mind on the last half of the movie.

The next morning, Will found a paper cup of coffee and a bakery box outside his door, bearing a single slice of spice cake liberally dusted with powdered sugar. A flutter of guilt was quickly shoved away as he went back inside to eat his breakfast, courtesy of Matthew.

He didn't see Matthew that day, but breakfast was outside his door again the next morning: coffee and a box of scones. He had guard duty in one of the casinos but would need to report to Matthew at the end of the day. Sighing lightly, Will gave his apartment an extra effort at cleaning, putting fresh sheets on the bed and taking out the trash.

He would invite Matthew to dinner as a thank you for his respectful attempts at an apology, then back to his place for a nightcap. If the night ended in sex, he was mentally prepared to lead Matthew where he wanted him.

Dinner was much more pleasant than their lunch, the conversation multi-layered and surprisingly deep. Will realized just how little he knew about Matthew, causing another guilty twinge in his chest. Also an only child, Matthew's father had been killed the same night as Leonas Lecter; his mother had been killed three years before that. The Browns had been with the Lecter Family for three generations, his grandfather helping to form the Family.

Matthew surprised Will with how much he knew about him, admitting, "Mr. Lecter is very thorough in his research before accepting someone into the Family."

Will didn't want to remember that first meeting with Hannibal: the way Hannibal's eyes had darkened just the slightest bit as he sat at the edge of the desk, the way he'd knelt at Hannibal's feet and sucked a light kiss to the ring, how Hannibal had ordered him out of the room leaving him confused and slightly aroused.

"I was equally as diligent in deciding which Family to approach," he said, forcing thoughts of Hannibal away. "The Lecter Family is the most progressive in terms of long-term thinking. It's not just about the next war, it's about keeping the Family strong and together."

“Loyalty and intelligence are hallmarks of our Family,” Matthew remarked, gently sliding his fingers underneath Will’s resting on the table. “I like your hands. They’re not made for guns,” he observed as he curled his fingers around Will’s, “they’re made for a more intimate weapon, like your knife. I’ve seen what you can do with it. You’re very skilled.”

The gentle touch and softly spoken words were at odds with the message, and Will was equally disturbed and aroused. “I’ve done what was necessary to survive,” he acknowledged, desperately wanting to change the subject away from his past. “Just as you have.” He leaned forward, giving his best flirtatious smile. “But tonight isn’t about survival, it’s about enjoying life.”

Matthew’s eyes shone as he squeezed Will’s hand. “I’m enjoying my time with you. I’d like to see you again.”

He chuckled and returned the squeeze. “Let’s finish this date before deciding on the next, okay?” At Matthew’s dumfounded expression, Will leaned over the table and briefly pressed their lips together. “How about a nightcap at my place?”

Will was prepared to control the pace and tone once they were back at his apartment, but Matthew was almost hesitant to touch him, accepting a glass of whiskey and settling on the couch with a full cushion between them.

“I appreciate slow,” Will said as he moved next to Matthew, taking a sip of his drink and placing it in the table. “There’s no rush to get to the finish line. We’ve got all night, but you don’t have to wait to kiss me. Kissing,” Will brushed his lips along Matthew’s cheek, “is encouraged.”

Matthew leaned into him, mouthing along Will’s jaw before gently settling over Will’s mouth. A warm, comfortable feeling washed over Will as he returned the kiss, rubbing his fingertips along the back of Matthew’s neck.

The kiss gradually increased in intensity, questing tongues exploring as hands slid under jackets to shift them out of the way. Will found himself mesmerized by the hard muscles beneath his fingertips, Matthew’s chest and arms broadcasting the strength he kept hidden from view.

“I want to see you,” he breathed as he hauled Matthew off the couch and directed him to the bed, pulling his shirt over his head as Matthew did the same. Will sank to his knees, mouthing at each rippling muscle, pressing his tongue between each rib until he was at Matthew’s waistband. “Condoms are in the drawer if you want my mouth on you,” he mumbled.

He let out a surprised huff as he was hauled to his feet and kissed soundly, thoroughly, breathlessly. Matthew’s voice was low and gruff, shaking with barely contained desire. “I want to taste you first.”

Reeling from the kiss and the heat between them, Will nodded and sat down on the bed, crawling toward the middle. Matthew’s hands met his at his belt buckle, hastily working the leather open and stripping Will of the rest of his clothing.

Will braced himself for Matthew's first touch, but jumped when gentle lips caressed his jaw, then neck, Matthew slowly working his way down. Blinded by the haze of arousal, balls aching and hands flexing on the brass headboard, Will braced his feet on the bed as Matthew finally sucked on his leaking tip, giving only a second's relief until the need came back in a rush.

"Please," Will groaned, raising his head to look down at Matthew, intensely concentrating on the dick in his mouth. Matthew's eyes were closed, his hands braced on Will's thighs, thumbs rubbing incessantly at Will's inner thighs, all driving Will to madness. "Matthew, *please*."

Hearing his name seemed to encourage Matthew, and Will moaned in relief as Matthew applied more suction, more pressure, *more* until Will was drawing in huge gulps of air as Matthew worked with him a sure, slow tongue.

A hand gently cupped his balls, mouth pushing down to the base of his dick, and Will was gone, curling in on himself with the strength of his orgasm.

The weight and warmth of Matthew covered him, mouth sucking bruises into his neck and Will clung to him, hands sliding along sweat-damp skin. He pressed open-mouth kisses wherever he could reach, finally succeeding in rolling Matthew onto his back. He raked a hand through Matthew's short hair, holding him in place as he devoured his mouth, not caring about the bitter taste of himself on his tongue.

He attacked Matthew's chest with teeth and tongue, a dark spike of satisfaction as he felt Matthew finally gripping his hair. He worked his way down, hastily stripping Matthew of his trousers and shoes he hadn't bothered to take off, grabbing a condom from the bedside drawer before resuming his place between Matthew's thighs.

Matthew was thicker than he was used to, so Will used his hand at the base to twist and tease. He worked Matthew relentlessly, enjoying the sharply indrawn breaths and low, appreciative moans. When he met Matthew's eyes, they were filled with wonderment, lust...and something sharp and bright that cut Will to the bone.

Matthew was already in love with him.

Doubling his efforts, Will was rewarded a few minutes later with Matthew's orgasm, silent and pulsing warm in his hand. Taking off the condom, Will kissed his way back up Matthew's chest to wrap his arms around him and breathe into his neck.

Will felt surprisingly secure in Matthew's embrace, loose enough not to feel too confining, yet strong enough to let him feel the power of Matthew's arms. "You can stay if you want," he muttered as he felt Matthew start to pull away from him.

"You're okay with that?" Matthew asked, his voice absolutely shredded with emotion.

Closing his eyes and pressing his forehead into Matthew's shoulder, he nodded. "Yeah."

They had strayed to different sides of the bed during the night, Will getting up first to piss and get dressed. Matthew woke up as Will was pulling on a fresh shirt, and Will flashed him

a shy grin. “Good morning.”

“Morning, Sunshine,” Matthew greeted him with a kiss to the cheek as he passed on the way to the bathroom.

Unsure how to feel about the nickname, Will finished getting dressed and fixed his hair. He’d had many with his clients, the women in particular loving to call him by pet names. The men hadn’t bothered beyond “pretty boy”, but Matthew’s affection was genuine.

Love. His *love* was genuine.

It was something Will was going to have to get used to, and fast. He had the morning to think on it, at least; Matthew was meeting with the new recruits starting today and Will didn’t know how much of his time would be taken up by them.

Matthew kissed him goodbye with his apologies for running off, Will assuring him he understood that duty came first. It was one thing they definitely agreed on.

Will was on duty again at the casino and checked that his gun was loaded and his knife in his pocket before locking up. The day was uneventful, most clients understanding the rules of Lecter-owned casinos and respecting Hannibal enough to not cause trouble, leaving Will to his thoughts.

He liked Matthew. The more he got to know him, the more he understood him. Matthew’s unique place in the world made him appear as an outsider, but Will could bring him in, let people warm up to him. He was certainly warming up to Matthew, though that small niggling at the back of his mind warned not to fully let his guard down. He cared for Matthew and believed he could come to care more for him, but he wouldn’t open himself up to love. He couldn’t; he had to cut that part of himself off again to keep his sanity. He’d survived it before; he could survive it again.

When he met Matthew for dinner again that night, he let himself relax, laughing when he felt like it, remaining somber when he didn’t. He was as honest and open as he could be and it hurt that it seemed to be enough for Matthew.

To soothe his guilt, Will took Matthew to bed again, using every trick he knew to bring Matthew to a mind-blowing orgasm, only letting Matthew reciprocate when he insisted.

With Matthew pressed against his back, lingering kisses along his shoulder, Will braved saying, “I care about you a lot, Matthew, but I want to be honest. I don’t know that I can love you. Love anyone, again.”

When Matthew’s arm tightened around him, Will feared the worst, but then a long, slow press of lips against his shoulder shook him to his core. “I know. I don’t expect you to. Letting me love you is all I’ll ever ask.”

“You deserve someone who can love you,” Will growled, hating himself for manipulating Matthew like he had.

“You deserve the world at your feet,” Matthew rumbled in his ear, and it was all Will could do not to give in to the thunderous *need* that crashed through him. “I see more than people realize. I know what you gave up for the Family. I respect you for that. I love you for that.”

He turned in Matthew’s arms, shocked at Matthew’s insight and disgusted at his own selfishness. “You know I’m still in love with Hannibal?”

Matthew’s smile was heartbreaking, yet sure and strong. “I know you sacrificed your happiness so the Family would be strong again. Our duty is to the Family, no matter the cost.”

“I would die to protect the Family,” Will stated, studying Matthew’s somber, steady gaze.

“So would I. But tonight isn’t about the Family. Tonight is just us.” Matthew kissed him, slipping his tongue between Will’s lips, coaxing him. Daring him.

A surge of raw, untamed *desire* had Will returning the kiss with just as much strength, just as much power as Matthew poured into him. The rest of the night was a blur, frantic desire chased by exhausted kisses, a light doze to refresh them for another round.

Both were a sticky, sated mess when they woke up just after dawn, cramming themselves into Will’s small shower to clean themselves off, but ending up giving mutual hand jobs and trading kisses until the water ran cold.

“I have to spend the day with the recruits,” Matthew explained as he pulled on his jacket, staring at Will in the mirror. “Can I see you tonight?”

Will ran his fingers along the bruise on his neck, sucked there by Matthew. It would be hidden beneath his collar, a very careful, very aware placement. A shiver went through him, but he nodded his agreement. “Your turn to pick the restaurant.”

“I’ll see you tonight.” Will returned the brief kiss Matthew bestowed on him before leaving, his eyes going back to the mark on his neck. He touched it once more before dressing, holding onto that niggling doubt at the back of his mind.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> The chapter where shit gets real. Bedelia requests an audience with Hannibal - and asks for a whole lot more. Another nugget from Will's past is revealed, and our lovers get back together.
>
> Tags for this chapter: Intercrural sex, Explicit Sexual Content, Vague Reference to Suicide

Hannibal came out of his musings at the knock to his door.

He'd secluded himself away the past three months, falling back to old habits of running his Organization. Pouring over the books, researching new ideas for generating revenue, looking into areas of improvement within his holdings and denying Crawford's futile attempts at searching the House illegally. It kept him busy, but Will was never far from his thoughts. It was maddening, being ruled by his emotions in such a way. He'd let himself get soft, get comfortable, and it had forced a war upon his Family.

Never again.

"Come," he called, bidding Price to enter.

"Bedelia du Maurier requests an audience with you on Thursday," Price announced, his mouth twisted in such a way that Hannibal didn't need to ask his opinion on Miss du Maurier.

"Please extend her the loan of a courtesy car for Thursday at two," Hannibal replied automatically, making a note in his calendar. He'd had no dealings with du Maurier in over two years and could only surmise that it had to do with his recent undertaking of the Hobbs Organization.

He didn't sense when Price left, only felt the ache of aloneness that had been growing steadily since…

He straightened himself in his chair and cut off that line of thinking. It would do no good to dwell on what was past. He had the future of the Business to worry about, and now he had to prepare for du Maurier's visit.

The new recruit reports from Brown weren't going to appraise themselves, so with a quiet sigh, Hannibal tackled them first. Not one recruit stood out as special, but most of them would be solid additions to the Family, their skills and assets building on the foundation that Hannibal had set all those years ago.

Next, he requested the field reports on the integration of Hobbs' Organization, going over every minute detail to make sure du Maurier could slip nothing by him. Lower ranking soldiers had pledged their fealty reluctantly, but valued their lives over duty to a dead man. Higher ranking members and the inner circle had chosen death over betrayal of the Family, despite there being no Family left. Hannibal hadn't concerned himself with Hobbs' holdings, letting his lieutenants reorganize the casinos and whore houses to more align with Lecter practices.

Miss Bloom had surprised him by taking up with Lady Margot, the singer she had been sent to evaluate for Hobbs. Hannibal had a discreet guard on them, but so far, neither Miss Bloom nor Lady Margot had given any signs of betrayal.

Perhaps du Maurier's presence had nothing to do with Hobbs. Hannibal immersed himself in reports from every Organization, every arrest, every FBI raid, every acquisition to prepare himself for every contingency. Bedelia du Maurier was never to be underestimated and should always be construed as a lethal opponent.

Knowing he needed every advantage at his disposal, it was nevertheless with great reluctance that Hannibal requested Will's presence at du Maurier's meeting. A bodyguard would not be out of place, as he knew du Maurier always traveled with at least two of her men.

Will arrived fifteen minutes early, giving a short nod before taking his place at Hannibal's left side, back against the wall. He was far enough away that his presence wouldn't be overbearing or noticed, but Hannibal felt it all the same, as if Will's hand was on his shoulder.

Hannibal spent those fifteen minutes steadily blocking out every sense of Will's presence, his scent and heat and *nearness* until he was nothing more than another fixture in the room.

Hannibal greeted du Maurier with a bow and a kiss to the back of her hand, indicating her bodyguard should take a place near the door. "It's good to see you again, Bedelia," he lied smoothly, guiding her to a chair and helping her to sit.

"And you, Hannibal. What's it been, two years now?" du Maurier proffered, sliding off her gloves finger by finger and draping them elegantly across her lap. "I do hope my request didn't interfere with your work."

Hannibal eyed her shrewdly, wondering at her opening gambit. "Family Business is my work," he reminded her lightly, narrowing his gaze slightly. "For you to travel such a distance, however, is certainly unusual. Are you acquiring again?"

She smiled, slow and knowing. "I am always on the lookout for new blood for my stables," she asserted. "I have come with a proposal for you." She removed an envelope from her purse, holding it out to him. As he took it and slipped out the folded paper, she explained, "That is a contract for the workers you brought on from Hobbs' Organization. As you can see, my offer is generous."

Seven thousand dollars for twelve men was hardly generous, especially when Hannibal knew what would happen to those men once they left his protection. "What makes you presume

that I would be willing to part with anyone from Hobbs' Organization?" he said, folding the paper and pushing it to the side.

The slightest tug downward of her mouth and the tiniest narrowing of her eyes exposed her displeasure at the dismissal. "His establishments weren't profitable enough for you to keep them going," du Maurier insisted. "Why waste good money to fix bad management? Let them close and sell me the men. You'll make a sure profit this way."

All of Hannibal's suspicions went on full alert. He had already turned around half of Hobbs' establishments to make a profit and most of the others would be healthy by the end of the year; du Maurier had to know that. "I'm making a fine profit now," he cautioned her, rubbing his finger against his chin and fixing her with a dead-eyed stare. "What is the real purpose of your visit?"

Her polite veneer fell away and she gazed boldly at Will. "Since you're through with him, I want to buy him. Ten thousand on top of the seven I offered for the others ought to be fair compensation."

Hannibal could feel cracks forming in the walls he'd built around his feelings for Will and his newly created defenses slipping. Will's lifelong fear raced into those cracks, hammering its way into Hannibal's psyche, feeding his anger.

Hannibal was sure his barely controlled rage could be felt even by the cold-as-ice du Maurier. "You come into my House and presume to offer me money for one of my Family?"

Her soft laugh was full of derision. "Don't presume to hide your fuck boy behind the illusion of Family. I know precisely what he is, where he came from and what he's been doing at your behest." Her smile was shark-like and knowing. "You got what you wanted from him and passed him down the ranks. Tell me I'm wrong and I will extend my apologies for disrespecting you."

Hannibal couldn't risk exposing his weakness: that his love for one man threatened the Family. But neither would he be intimated by the likes of *her*. "What Mr. Graham has been doing is providing valuable insight into Business matters and protecting this Family." He paused the briefest of moments, letting the weight of his words sink in. "While it's true that I asked him to use his special skill set to gather information for the Family, I made it clear that it was his choice, not an order."

Du Maurier tilted her head in acknowledgement of his words, but her smile only softened to a predatory smirk. "He sounds like the ideal Family member, willing to sacrifice his body for the cause." Her gaze slithered down Will's body, interest lighting her eyes. Hannibal could feel Will's discomfort and it echoed his own, but he had to uncover the real reason for du Maurier's proposal. She would not be so bold and disrespectful if she didn't have something very big to gain. "But that doesn't explain why he's not warming your bed anymore. I dare say it isn't because he lost his virility. Did you tire of him so easily?"

Hannibal was so incensed, he could barely see. Words choked him, his articulation vanishing in the face of such disrespect.

“It was my choice.” Will’s voice rang out in the absence of Hannibal’s answer. Not daring to turn around for fear of giving away his emotional state, Hannibal remained silent and let Will speak. He suspected Will had a plan worked out already, so Hannibal kept his gaze on du Maurier, watching her reaction to being talked to by someone of such low rank.

Will’s voice was strong as he undoubtedly stared du Maurier down. “Don Lecter’s duty is to the Family. His love for the Family is unwavering. That’s what attracted me to him, and it’s inevitably what drove me away.”

Du Maurier looked vaguely ill, peering at Will as if he were an annoying insect buzzing about her ear. Hannibal had no doubt that Will pinned her with the exact same look.

“Duty must always come first with Family and I believe that as strongly as any other. I couldn’t compete against the Family, nor would I ever want to.” Will’s voice softened and Hannibal felt his heart breaking at the stark truth that had driven them apart. “I’m ashamed that I thought it wasn’t enough, when I had been given everything.”

“Such a touching story,” du Maurier mused with disdain, directing her gaze once again to Hannibal. “Do you expect me to believe you allowed this boy to leave you? You, the Head of the Family?”

Reining in his temper, Hannibal struck at the heart of du Maurier’s Organization. “I don’t keep my Family on a leash. I’ve earned their respect and loyalty. I encourage independent thinking, allowing each member to be their own person, all things you know nothing about.”

Du Maurier went red-faced with indignation, her gloves now fisted in her hand, crushing the delicate satin. “Autonomy is the death of order. The more freedoms you give, the more will be taken until you are in charge of nothing. Discipline is respected and I am feared as well as respected by all those under my name.”

“But not loved,” Will’s voice cut through the tension, du Maurier’s expression crumbling into outrage at having been spoken to out of turn.

Hannibal cut him a sharp look and Will lowered his gaze respectfully, indicating he wouldn’t speak out again. “While I will apologize for Mr. Graham’s outburst,” Hannibal said, turning back to du Maurier, “You have shown nothing but disdain and disrespect to me and my Family. One more slight and I will remove you from this House.”

Du Maurier inclined her head, muttering a vague apology but showing no remorse for her actions. “Internal Family matters are often complex, and I regret my misinterpretation of what I believed to be correct.” She fixed her gaze on Hannibal then, eyes gleaming with satisfaction. “However, I have brought two proposals to the Head of the Family, as the Articles of the Organization dictate. You alone have the authority to accept them.”

She stood and Hannibal rose to his feet as well, his hand falling to his suit button to fasten it. His fingers itched to pull out his gun and aim right between her eyes, but she had indeed followed the rules and he couldn’t kill her for being brazen, no matter how much he wanted to.

“He’s as well-spoken and educated as my informant said,” she continued to blithely insult Will as she pulled on her gloves. “I have several clients who have expressed interest in intellectual conversation over random holes to fuck or flesh to mark. I’m willing to offer twenty thousand if I can take him with me now.”

Hannibal wrapped his hand around her upper arm rather than her throat, squeezing threateningly. He heard the dual sounds of guns being drawn and the satisfying click of a hammer being pulled back behind him. “I gave you fair warning, yet you continue to disrespect me. Your proposals are rejected outright and you are hereby barred from ever stepping foot in this House again.”

He shoved her toward her bodyguard, ignoring her spluttering outrage. “Escort Miss du Maurier out and make sure she doesn’t linger on my property. Trespassers are shot on sight.”

He stood with his hand on the doorknob, waiting for them to pass, then slammed the door shut, gripping the knob so tight he felt it squeak. He sensed movement behind him and barked, “Stay back.”

Will stopped. Movement stopped. Hannibal’s heart stopped, then began again, beating double-time. How had du Maurier found out? Who would *dare* betray him in such a way? Had it been a last-ditch effort by Hobbs to discredit him? If so, why had du Maurier waited months before striking? Why had no one else tried to blackmail him?

All the fight left him and he leaned heavily against the door, not knowing what to do for the first time in his life.

“Her information is recent,” Will began hesitantly after a long moment of silence. “It’s also wrong, but only you and I know that.” Will didn’t need to elaborate. “What did you research uncover?”

Hannibal curled his hand into a fist against the door. “There was *nothing*. Nothing that indicated my enemies were moving against me. Nothing about you. Nothing about this. She blindsided me.” He finally turned, daring to look directly at Will for the first time in weeks.

A relatively healthy glow, marred by worried lines and a frown. No dark circles beneath his eyes, no lost weight, but in the deepest recesses of his eyes, pain and longing. It matched what Hannibal felt most days and he turned away from it, hating the weakness it brought out in him. “What does she stand to gain?” he asked, pushing away from the door and striding to his desk, picking up the offensive paper. “Offering trivial money for men she couldn’t possibly want, then that contemptible proposition.”

“She wants me, but not for what you think,” Will informed him quietly, keeping his distance. “Her last comment betrayed her intentions. She knows about my imagination, somehow. She wants me at her side, feeding her information about her enemies and those closest to her. She’s afraid. Someone has her so scared that she was willing to risk your anger.”

Hannibal let the offending paper fall to the desk as he stared at Will, unblinking. “That wasn’t fear I witnessed. That was blatant disregard of the most basic human decency.”

“It was fear,” Will insisted, holding Hannibal’s gaze. “She played her last, desperate move, knowing it would get us talking. Knowing I would be able to glean her true intentions. Knowing you would trust me to tell you the truth, which is that she’s asking for help. Do Heads of Organizations often ask each other for help?”

“Never,” Hannibal dismissed quickly, then gave it more serious consideration. “Alliances have been formed against a threat, but immediately dissolved once the threat is eliminated. To my knowledge, the Head of a Family has never directly asked for help from another.”

“Du Maurier is a very proud woman,” Will observed, quietly drawing Hannibal to the inevitable conclusion.

Irrational anger burned through him. “I don’t want to help her,” Hannibal proclaimed, sitting down in his chair and staring at the envelope. “She doesn’t deserve help, not after what she’s done.” Whether he meant the insults or her treatment of those under her protection, Hannibal wasn’t sure. Perhaps both. Perhaps he could be petty enough to let her Organization fall and scatter the broken pieces to the wind.

Will gingerly sat in the chair vacated by du Maurier, as if afraid Hannibal would order him out, next. Hannibal maintained his silence, mulling over the nuances of his conversation with du Maurier.

“I’ve been terrified of her my entire life,” Will said in a low, confidential voice. “I despise everything about her. Her disdain for those she deems beneath her and how she treats those who fall under her protection like cattle rather than men. But she’s still the Head of a Family.”

He let Will’s words roll over him as he dissected du Maurier’s words. They were out of step from her normal confidence, her actions bold and insulting, designed to grab his attention until he couldn’t ignore them. By forcibly having her removed, whoever might be watching the House would see that he had refused her, keeping her vulnerable. And if the threat was so great that du Maurier couldn’t give a hint as to who it was, then his Family was in danger, too. Possibly other Organizations. “This unseen threat must be brought to light,” Hannibal finally agreed with a weary sigh.

“Can I see my contract?” Will suddenly asked, peering over the desk.

Hannibal flicked his gaze over the papers, sitting up straight and checking the envelope. “She didn’t prepare one. Does that mean she hadn’t planned on making such an outrageous offer?”

“Or she was being watched and didn’t want them to know about me,” Will surmised. “What about her mentioning the Articles? What significance do those hold?”

“You’ve read them?” Hannibal queried, knowing Will had absorbed a lot of information about the Organization in his first few months. At Will’s nod, Hannibal shrugged. “I know as much as you do. They contain a formal means of presenting a proposal to another Family.”

“She specifically said you alone had the authority to make the decision,” Will noted. “A formal proposal to the Family has to be approved by the lieutenants.”

Hannibal barely heard Will as he studied the paper du Maurier had given him, wondering at the significance of the numbers. She was oddly specific in her offered amount and the number of men she intended to buy. “Get me the ledger for Hobbs’ Organization with the final count of his holdings and workers.”

He heard Will scramble to do his bidding as he took out pencil and paper and began to sketch an idea. He barely looked up as the books were placed in front of him, flipping to the pages he needed. As he suspected, only one place employed twelve men: *The High Tail* that bordered Dolarhyde’s and Hobbs’ territories—and his. On a whim, he drew a ‘7’, extending the bottom up into an ‘s’ shape. Staring at the figure he’d just drawn, Hannibal circled the intersection of states, frowning in displeasure at the revelation. “The Dragon.”

“Dolarhyde? He’s been a near recluse the last few years,” Will commented.

“Lying in wait for a weakness to present itself, no doubt,” Hannibal said testily, tossing the pencil aside. He let his mind drift, picking apart his conversation with du Maurier in light of the new evidence, when the unnatural stillness in the room disturbed him.

Will sat immobile in the chair opposite him, head bowed, fingers clenched together. “You need to release me from my vow,” he declared, stunning Hannibal with his impassioned plea. “I need to get as far from here as possible, but I can’t leave if I’m bound to this Family.”

The logic of Will’s assertion was certainly valid, but Hannibal’s instinctive reaction was the exact opposite. “It would serve no purpose. Even if I gave you permission to leave, your conscience wouldn’t let you abandon me. You’ve already proven that.”

“I won’t be the cause of your downfall,” Will argued, his expression darkening. “Even indirectly, I’m being used against you. I never should have gotten involved with you.”

Hannibal studied his vibrant, exasperating chameleon and chuckled to himself. “We were inevitable,” he conceded, mouth twisted in a wry smile. “Do you think you could have resisted me for much longer, nor I you? Since the night I first heard your laugh, I was intrigued. I’m only more intrigued by you now, years later.”

Will slowly shook his head, tears standing in his eyes. “Let me go, please.”

Hannibal stood and rounded the desk to sit at the edge, in a reversal of the first time Will had been in his study. He leaned forward, hands on his thighs, staring directly into the depths of Will’s soul. “You couldn’t survive my death.”

Devastation stared back at him, but a thread of steel resonated in each syllable: “But you would survive mine.”

Hannibal had Will’s face in his hands in the blink of an eye, drawing him out of the chair and into a deep, probing kiss. He tasted the tears that Will refused to let fall, that he himself refused to allow to form, dusty ash and bitterness coating his tongue.

When they broke apart, Hannibal kept his forehead touching Will’s and murmured, “We are conjoined, you and I. I doubt either of us could survive the death of the other.”

Hannibal let out a quiet breath as his brave, foolish chameleon refused to give an inch. “There’s no telling how long Dolarhyde has been after you or what he’s got planned. I won’t be used as leverage against you. To save the Family, you have to let me go.”

Annoyance ran thick through his blood and Hannibal tugged at the slightly curling hair beneath his hands. “And you believe it would be better for this Family if my best source of intel were to vanish? If I had to send out men to track you down, to make sure you stayed hidden? That I would never know if the next threat to kill you could actually make good on that threat, or if it were merely a bluff?” He pulled Will even closer until they were barely a hair’s breadth apart. “How is any of that better than being at my side?”

He had struck a nerve, deep and resounding as Will seemed incapable of speech, and was looking at him with such adoration, such love…

He released his tight grip, stroking his thumbs along Will’s cheeks. “I tried to ignore it. I tried to fight it, but you cannot control with respect to whom you fall in love.” Hannibal pressed their lips together, not knowing which of them was trembling.

It was Will who deepened the kiss, chasing the last of the bitterness away and replacing it with desire. Hannibal lost himself in Will, shedding his title and armor until he was simply a man, freely acknowledging his love for the man in his arms.

As they sank further and further into each other, the world fell away, Hannibal guiding them into his private bedroom.

Will was eager and daring, his hands boldly stripping them both of their clothes. He pulled Hannibal down on top of him, laid out on the bed, no seductive techniques, just pure, raw need.

Hannibal went willingly, eagerly, devouring wherever his mouth landed, stroking wherever his hands touched. Will guided his head down, pushing his hips upward as Will silently demanded more intimacy.

Hannibal wasted no time in getting Will’s erection into his mouth, the remembered taste bursting across his tongue. Everything was bright and new yet comfortably familiar, from the little sounds that Will made, to the fingers curling and then releasing in his hair, too afraid in the past to tug, now gripping firmly and manhandling Hannibal where Will wanted him.

It was over too quickly for Hannibal, sucking Will clean until he heard the hiss of discomfort. He wanted to savor every last drop, licking Will’s testicles and inner thighs, Will spreading his legs wider to give him easier access.

“Don’t stop,” Will rasped, pushing himself up to his elbows so he could watch.

The angle was too hard on Hannibal’s neck to maintain eye contact, so he concentrated on seeking out the most sensitive areas on Will’s body, closing his eyes to memorize the taste and scent. Up the crease of his thigh, kisses around the base of his spent penis, sucking gently at the testicles, nibbling at the innermost skin of Will’s thighs, all drawing small, hitched breaths and shuddered sighs.

“Roll over,” Hannibal instructed, gently pushing at Will’s hip until Will was prone on the bed, looking back at him with sated, trusting eyes.

He started his worship of Will’s body all over again, from his neck to his shoulders, down his spine, to the dip of his lower back, to the upper curve of his ass. His lips grazed over the swell of Will’s ass, stilling at the hitched breath, then smiling as Will shifted his hips impatiently, opening his legs just a bit more.

He pressed a kiss to the middle of Will’s back, nuzzling the warm skin until he reached Will’s ear. “I promise there will be no penetration.” He waited for Will’s hesitant nod, then slid into position over Will’s back, easing his erection between Will’s thighs.

Hannibal held still through the shocked, tense silence, cataloging the gradual relaxation of Will’s muscles until a hand reached back and gripped his arm. “Okay.”

It was the most exquisite feeling sliding between Will’s thighs, experiencing every surprised huff, every soft moan, every shudder when Hannibal pressed upward at just the right angle.

He slid his hand up to cover Will’s gripping the sheet, tangling their fingers together awkwardly. He gently squeezed Will’s thighs together as his climax built at the base of his spine, feeling sweat roll down his back like a caress. “Tighten your thighs,” he whispered, groaning as Will obeyed, his orgasm wrung from him.

He breathed heavily into Will’s shoulder, every nerve ignited where their skin touched. When he was able, Hannibal held Will’s hip as he rolled them to their sides, his hand sliding up to the center of Will’s chest.

Will’s hand immediately covered his, arching backwards to kiss him from the awkward angle. “That was…intense.”

Hannibal hummed into Will’s hair, nosing down Will’s cheek to press a kiss to his jaw. “The practice goes back to ancient Greece. It’s rumored that Alexander the Great and Hephaestion shared in the same pleasure.”

“They don’t teach that in school,” Will commented breathlessly, clasping Hannibal’s hand and dragging it down his chest, encouraging it to wrap around Will’s softened penis. It had to hurt; it hadn’t been long enough for Will to fully recuperate, but Will’s hand was firm and sure.

Hannibal grasped the overstimulated flesh and stroked lightly, mesmerized by both their hands moving in tandem. A thread of pain ran through Will’s gasps so Hannibal kept his pace slow and even, giving Will’s body time to recover.

Only when that pained note had transformed into pleasure did Hannibal tighten his grip and increase the pace, pressing his mouth to Will’s shoulder as Will pulsed in their hands, then sagged back against him.

Each of Will’s exhales sounded like a half-formed whine, and when Will dragged their hands to his mouth and kissed Hannibal’s knuckles, Hannibal felt the huffs of air against his skin.

He could feel the exhaustion coming off of Will in waves, the heavy weight of Will's body where it lay against his.

Will brought their clasped hands to his chest, letting his head slide down until it was tucked beneath Hannibal's chin. "I need to tell you why I won't fuck."

As intimate as they'd just been, it didn't surprise Hannibal that Will would choose that moment to share something so private. "Very well," he commented lightly, keeping his tone as neutral as possible.

"Antony, the college guy I met when I was twenty." Will's voice was soft with remembrance and thick with anguish. "I was in love with him from our first meeting. After he paid me for our first date, I refused any other money from him. We dated for five weeks. By the second week, we were sharing a bed most nights. Just hand jobs at first, but when I went down on him, he wanted to try it, too. He was so curious, so eager to learn."

From the way Will was settled against him, Hannibal couldn't see his expression, but every word felt like a benediction to a lost love. He gently rubbed his chin through Will's hair, silently encouraging him.

"One night we were roughhousing in bed when I pinned him beneath me. He…his reaction was so strong. He asked if it was possible for a man to be penetrated and I said no." A long pause. "I lied to him and he knew it. He'd grown in confidence and started talking to the other guys at the club, asking what they liked. The next night, he was ready for me and my objections." Will's voice dropped to a ragged whisper. "That first time…the first time I entered him…I would have burned half the world if it meant he would always look at me like that. Like I was the only person in the world. That he would only ever love me."

Will fell silent and Hannibal hugged him slightly, just to let him know he was still there and still listening, his curiosity piqued.

"I fucked him every night for the next three weeks, before he had to go back to St. John's." Hannibal felt the hitch of breath beneath his hand and pressed his cheek to the top of Will's head, grounding him. "I saw his obituary in the paper two months later. It didn't list a cause of death, so I used all the money I had left to get the police report."

Hannibal knew of only one reason not to list cause of death and didn't want Will to have to say it aloud. "I understand," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of Will's head. It was no wonder Will had kept those memories to himself; they were deeply personal and not easy to speak of, especially given their young ages at the time.

"His family didn't give him a funeral, not that I could've gone." A stretch of silence, then a shuddering sigh. "I'll never know why he did it. That's what hurts the most."

Even without knowing Antony, Hannibal could guess at his motivations. Home from a religious university, meeting Will and exploring his sexuality, to return to university a changed young man. Being around his friends again, doubts would have crept in, everything in his life questioned, leading to more confusion.

He suspected Will had come to the same conclusions but was afraid of their implications. To give in to something you'd vehemently opposed and discovering you found pleasure in it, only for that pleasure to be tarnished by grief. It would have been overwhelming for anyone, but falling in love with Antony had only driven the pain in deeper, cementing Will's fear into a certainty.

But that certainty was crumbling, as evidenced by Will's enjoyment of their recent pleasure and his willingness to share those intimate memories. Not wanting to push, Hannibal reminded him softly, "You cannot know what is truly in another's heart or mind."

"I know yours." Will turned until they were facing one another. "You won't let me leave and I can't leave you. You're putting me above the Family, just as I am for you. We are both risking everything to stay together. We could destroy the Organization."

"Or we could strengthen it beyond besiegement," Hannibal countered, feeling the stirrings of desire once again. "Together, we are formidable." He slipped his tongue between Will's parted lips, coaxing a low groan from deep in Will's chest.

Will pulled away reluctantly. "As much as I'd love to, my dick won't be up for anything for a few hours."

Hannibal chuckled, brushing his lips across Will's cheek. "Lying here with you is all the gratification I require." In truth he wanted to wash up, but he was too content to leave Will's side.

Though it was only late afternoon, they dozed in each other's arms, Will's soft breath against his neck the last thing Hannibal was consciously aware of. Until a possible reason for du Maurier bringing up the Articles popped into his head, shocking him wide awake.

Careful not to disturb Will, he slipped out of bed, donned his robe and pulled the lever to open the door. Padding barefoot across the floor to the shelf that contained the Organization's most important documents, he flipped to his copy of the Articles and skimmed them until he found the passage on spousal rights.

Hannibal carefully closed the book and returned it to the shelf in a daze. He would need to keep this revelation to himself until he could form a plan to discuss with Will. It was far too dangerous to let anyone know what he was contemplating.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Nothing but angst in this chapter.

Matthew waiting behind him when Will turned around.

The kiss that tasted like goodbye and regret.

Blinding, agonizing pain that dropped him to his knees, then laid him out on the ground.

His entire field of vision filled with dead, wide eyes staring back at him.

One word, uttered so brokenly, so desperately: *Hannibal*.

Will gasped himself awake, his body blazing with pain both remembered and new. His hand pressed against the wounds on his abdomen, now healing, a constant reminder that he had fucked up.

After that glorious afternoon spent in Hannibal's bed, Will had tried to go back to Matthew as if nothing had changed, yet everything was different, especially himself.

Will channeled his happiness into his interactions with Matthew, but pulled away when Matthew tried to be more intimate. An excuse of a sour stomach could only be used once. He couldn't say he was tired from his day because he reported his activities to Matthew. Feigning sickness would invite Matthew to offer to stay and care for him.

Will's mistake was believing that Matthew's love for him, blinded him.

About a week after his and Hannibal's reunion, Hannibal had taken the lieutenants to an afternoon performance at the theater. Will remained behind with those guarding the House, thinking up different scenarios to break it off with Matthew. When the entourage pulled up near dusk, Will kept his gaze on the far side of the streets, watching for moving shadows. In front of the House swarmed Family, waiting to protect the lieutenants and Hannibal as they exited the cars.

Will studied the shadows in the building next door, breaking into a distracted smile as he turned and saw Matthew in front of him. "Enjoy the play?" he asked, sweeping his gaze over Matthew's shoulder to the building opposite.

His gaze snapped to Matthew's when his shoulders were grabbed, wondering if Matthew had seen something. His mind blanked when Matthew kissed him, something he'd never done in

front of the Family. Matthew's kiss was slow and sweet, the tenderness causing an ache to bloom in Will's chest.

Matthew pulled away just far enough to whisper, "I love you," twisting Will's stomach unpleasantly.

He'd never reconciled Matthew's love for him and his inability to return it, only ever able to reply, "I care about you more than you know." It felt strange to say the words now, especially given Matthew's odd behavior. "Did something happen at the theater?"

Will didn't understand why his hearing started buzzing in his head, but then pain whited out his vision and he clutched at Matthew's shoulders, trying to stay upright. "The Family must be protected at all costs," was murmured in his ear as the knife was withdrawn from his gut and plunged in again.

Will was robbed of breath, unable to do more than make helpless noises into Matthew's shoulder as the knife was thrust into him a third time. His knees buckled but Matthew held him close, making it look like they were embracing. "It will be over soon," he was promised, Matthew hushing him and kissing his cheek.

Matthew slid his hand inside Will's jacket and removed his gun. Will shook his head and tried to speak, but he was too weak. He could feel blood soaking his trousers and running down his legs to his shoes, threatening to spill over onto the sidewalk.

With one last press of lips to his cheek, Matthew released him. Losing the only thing supporting him, Will immediately crumpled, what little breath he had knocked out of him as he hit the ground.

His vision was blurred but he saw Matthew fire in Hannibal's direction. Saw Hannibal react as the bullets impacted him, everything within him screaming *no* as a cacophony of gunfire filled the air.

Matthew was dead before he joined Will on the ground, the sightless eyes the last thing Will saw before he lost consciousness.

Tears threatened at the memory, so Will asked, "What day is it?" to distract himself, his throat feeling like sandpaper. He didn't try to sit up this time, that lesson learned previously when he'd gone breathless from pain while attempting to get out of bed.

Beverly's expression was still closed off as she handed him a cup of water. "Thursday. It's been four weeks," she added, anticipating his next question.

Since regaining consciousness, all Will had thought about was Hannibal. He'd been too weak to talk, but Jimmy had been at his side and read the question in his eyes. He'd only been assured that Hannibal was alive, but as he regained his strength, he'd demanded more details.

All he had been told was that Hannibal had been shot three times, the last happening as Matthew fell, killed by the Family.

Will remembered none of it and Beverly was vague on supplying more details, but he *needed* to know. It clawed at his insides, consumed his imagination, constricted his heart. He sipped the water Beverly gave him, easing the burn in his throat before he tried to talk again. "When's the doctor coming?" he asked, intending to threaten Sutcliffe until he got answers on how severe Hannibal's injuries were.

As if reading his mind, Beverly leveled a perturbed glare at him. "This afternoon, but you're not going to ask him about Hannibal's condition."

"Why won't I?" he croaked, sounding less threatening than he'd intended, especially when he finished it off with a coughing fit.

Beverly's annoyance shifted to worry. She touched his shoulder, squeezing gently, ratcheting up Will's worry about Hannibal's condition. "The inner circle voted to restrict information on Hannibal's condition to the lieutenants in order to protect the Organization. I've told you all I can and Dr. Sutcliffe is bound by their decision."

He could feel his lower lip start to tremble and shifted his gaze to the ceiling, willing the tears to dry up. No one knew he and Hannibal were back together and until he spoke to Hannibal, he wouldn't say a word. As far as the Family knew, he and Matthew had been together until the bitter end. "What are they saying about the attack?" he asked, wishing his voice was stronger.

"Nothing." Beverly tightened her grip on his shoulder, offering support. "They're waiting until you're stronger to question you, though they're hesitant to do it without Hannibal's counsel. Matthew can't defend himself and they'll only have your word on his motivation. You have to understand their position."

"I understand they'll want to name me as an accomplice," Will spat bitterly, seeing through the inner circle's indecision. If they moved against him without Hannibal's approval, Hannibal would be furious. If they didn't move against him, they could be seen as giving favor to him because of his presumably past relationship with Hannibal. "I don't know why he did it," he said, voice thick with grief. "He's third-generation Family. For him to try to kill Hannibal…it doesn't make sense."

Beverly leaned down to murmur into his ear, "It does if he knew you and Hannibal made up."

He couldn't tell if Beverly knew or only suspected, but he played dumb in case she was ordered to report everything he said back to the inner circle. He pitched his voice just as low, made weaker by the implication. "Jealousy? That might explain why he wanted me dead, but Hannibal? Matthew's life was devoted to protecting the Family."

When Beverly was quiet too long, Will tried to read her thoughtful expression. "To him, the Family wasn't a person, it was the Organization. If he thought the Head of the Family was compromised, a new one could be installed and the Organization would continue. Just as Hannibal took over for his father, and Leonas took over for his."

That niggling bit of doubt Will always harbored for Matthew flared up in warning, only far too late. His eyes fluttered closed as exhaustion demanded he sleep again, the added bonus of

not having to look at Beverly a welcome reprieve. He knew it would be used against him if Beverly had to report it, but he asked anyway: “How do I preserve the memory of Matthew?”

“Matthew tried to kill our Don,” Beverly censured him. “He doesn’t deserve that respect.”

“The Browns have been with this Family since the beginning,” Will argued. “I won’t let his legacy be destroyed because of my failings.”

Her sigh was soft and her tone tired. “It’s your call, Will, but I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“When have I ever?” he remarked, mentally dismissing her. His mind retreated once again to the last images he had of Hannibal, trying to ascertain the trajectory of the bullets, picking apart the sounds he remembered to detect any clues as to the exact place the bullets had hit Hannibal, anything to give him more information.

He sank into his memories until he was roused by Dr. Sutcliffe’s examination of his wounds, curling his hands into fists as pressure was applied to the stab wound furthest to the left. “Pretty sure my insides are still there, doc,” he snarled, breath hissing between his teeth as he rode out the pain.

“The infection hasn’t cleared up like I’d hoped,” Sutcliffe observed with a small frown. “I’ll up your dose of antibiotics.”

“Tell me how Hannibal is,” Will demanded without preamble, not releasing Sutcliffe’s surprised gaze.

Sutcliffe wasn’t unsympathetic; Will could see the conflict within him. “You know I can’t,” Sutcliffe said as he poked at the rest of Will’s wounds.

With what little strength Will had, he grabbed Sutcliffe’s wrist and implored, “Please.”

Sutcliffe regarded him, tested the strength of his grip and finally sighed in resignation. “He’s in the critical care ward.”

Shocked, Will let Sutcliffe finish his exam in silence, no longer feeling the physical pain of his body.

It wasn’t until Sutcliffe readied to leave that Will addressed him one last time. “When can he have visitors?”

He felt everything within him start to shut down when Sutcliffe didn’t give him an answer. Sutcliffe’s silence was enough and Will closed his eyes as he was left alone with his memories.

Three weeks later, Sutcliffe declared him free of infection but cautioned Will not to overexert himself.

Will’s interview with the lieutenants was scheduled for the next day, though in deference to his recovery, would be conducted in his hospital room and only five of the inner circle would

be present.

Will nodded his assent to everything, too numb to care what happened to him. He'd been given no update on Hannibal's condition, Sutcliffe too scared of the inner circle and Beverly bound by her vow. The only thing he knew was that Hannibal was still alive, as no successor had been announced. Of course, that could be a cover-up until the inner circle could pin the blame on him for Matthew going rogue, arrange his execution, then appoint a new Don.

On the morning of his interview, Will managed to get dressed with Jimmy's help. He may be brokenhearted, but he still had his pride and would meet his fate with as much dignity as he could manage.

He was sitting in the visitor chair, sweat beading on his upper lip from the strain in his gut, when Zeller entered, pale as a ghost. "He's asked for you."

Will concentrated on breathing steadily until a wheelchair could be brought for him, both his heart and mind a riotous mess. After being denied information about Hannibal for weeks, to being able to see and touch him, was overwhelming his senses. Sounds were too loud, smells gave him a headache and the lights of the hospital corridors were too bright.

Zeller pushed him as far as the door, then took his place beside it. Jimmy was on the other side, and Will's quick glance down the hall showed a scattering of other guards. He hadn't noticed any of them, so preoccupied with what he was about to do.

Will stared at the wood and steel of the door before him, finding the strength to push it open and angle his chair through the doorway.

The stench of illness and medicine turned his stomach. As his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, the shape of Hannibal formed beneath the sheets. As he wheeled closer, he saw how Hannibal's skin was pale and sickly, a thin sheen of sweat across his brow worrying Will more than the stillness. Hannibal was not a restless man, but even in sleep, he didn't seem this…lifeless.

"Hannibal? I'm here," he called softly, ignoring his body's protests as he leaned forward, cradling Hannibal's clammy hand between his own.

The faintest stirring of movement, then lashes fluttered and finally, Hannibal's eyes blinked open, not focusing at first. The drug-glazed eyes shifted to him, alighting in recognition. "Will."

From being numb from emotion to feeling everything all at once, Will started laughing and found he couldn't stop. Laughter turned to tears and he rested his forehead on their joined hands as he allowed relief to flood him. "They wouldn't tell me anything about your condition," he muttered, lifting his head to rest his cheek on their hands, not wanting to lose that connection ever again.

A tear slipped out of the corner of Hannibal's eye, his hand weakly squeezing Will's. "They said you nearly died."

Will pressed his lips to Hannibal's knuckles, giving him time to get his fury under control. It served no immediate purpose and Hannibal didn't need it, only his love and strength, such as it was. "I'm too stubborn to die and since we're conjoined, that means you can't die, either."

He was pleased when Hannibal smiled, even if it was merely a twitch of his lips. He rubbed his thumb along the back of Hannibal's hand, shivering at the tactile sensation. "I'm never going to leave your side again, Hannibal."

"I asked for you..." Hannibal paused to breathe, his pallor even more grey than when Will had come in.

Not wanting to tax Hannibal any further, Will squeezed his hand to get Hannibal's attention. "And I'm here. Whatever it is can wait until you're stronger."

"No more waiting." Hannibal surprised him with a burst of energy, pulling on their joined hands until Will was forced to partially stand, leaning heavily on the bed to ease the pressure on his injuries. Hannibal's gaze bore intently into his as he enunciated each syllable carefully, "Marry me."

Will's vision narrowed and he feared he was about to lose consciousness. His heart was pounding in his ears, his limbs were tingling and a thousand butterflies took flight in his chest as he stupidly asked, "Why?"

It was as if Hannibal had been held aloft by strings and Will's single word cut them. Hannibal sagged back on the bed, sweat breaking out over his skin as his eyes closed and his breathing grew labored.

"Hannibal," he called breathlessly, having to release Hannibal's hand to brace himself on the bed as his own strength bled out of him. "Hannibal. Don't you dare die on me. You don't get to say that and then die!"

Unfocused eyes blinked open and Hannibal's lips formed two words, though there was no strength behind their soft utterance: *say yes*.

Intense cramping doubled Will over and he fell forward onto Hannibal's side, breathless with pain that obliterated everything else. "Yes," he gasped, but didn't know if he'd been heard.

Delirious from the pain and with head swimming, Will called out, "Jimmy," and nearly cried when it came out no louder than a whisper. Turning his head caused a roiling wave of nausea and the world tilted as he slipped off the bed and landed on the floor.

Will let the pain take him as he heard the door open.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

It's a slow recovery for Hannibal and Will, and one of the strangest wedding plans ever attempted.

Tags for this chapter: Angst

Hannibal had alienated nearly everyone in his inner circle, but at last they understood that he would remain at Will’s side until such time that Will regained consciousness.

It had been a harrowing three months and the toll it had taken was evident in the gaunt face that stared back at Hannibal in the mirror. Will looked no better, his pale complexion barely darker than the linens he rested on.

Hannibal had no recollection of events after he’d asked Will to marry him. He’d been told that both he and Will had collapsed, and that Will had been taken into emergency surgery.

Hannibal was not well by any measure, but his threat to remove Sutcliff’s organs for not discovering that Will had been slowly bleeding internally was met with sufficient terror. In any other instance, watching the twitchy man stammer out excuses and apologies would have been immensely satisfying, but his worry for Will was overshadowed only by concern for his Organization.

His Organization had been without true leadership for months. While Hannibal trusted his lieutenants to do right by his established rules, there was simply no substitute for a Don’s active participation in the day-to-day running of their Organization.

Hearing that the local police and Crawford had been asking questions exhausted his finite strength. Hannibal gave the police chief a brief statement of what he remembered, being honest in his ignorance of why Brown had tried to kill both himself and Will. He had a theory, but speculating wouldn’t undo any of the damage that occurred. As for Crawford, Hannibal instructed his people to direct the FBI to the local police for his statement of record, refusing to see the agent when he was vulnerable.

Hannibal spent at least an hour at Will’s bedside twice a day, kissing the slack lips before accepting help back into his own bed. Even the few feet that separated their hospital rooms was too much and Hannibal longed for the day that they could sleep in the same bed again.

Sitting vigil at Will’s bedside, listening to the sound of them breathing in sync, Will finally heard his silent plea and blinked his eyes open. Hannibal clasped Will’s hand and brought it to his mouth, a kiss and a benediction in one. “Will.”

Anticipation buzzed through him as Will looked at him and licked his lips, his first words, “Something died in my mouth,” bringing the first genuine smile in a very long time to Hannibal’s lips.

Still smiling, he retrieved a cup and helped Will to raise his head, making sure Will only took small sips. “I’m familiar with that taste. Perhaps I can remedy it.” He laid Will’s head back onto the pillow and followed him down until he could press their lips together in a gentle kiss. “Better?” he asked as he brushed his fingers through Will’s curls, longer now that he hadn’t been able to cut them for months.

Color returned to Will’s cheeks and his eyes lost most of their dullness as he smiled weakly. “You’re out of bed.”

Hannibal’s hand tightened briefly in Will’s hair before he smoothed down the tangled locks. “It’s been three weeks since you visited me. You had to be rushed into emergency surgery. You’re in the critical care ward next to my room. You promised to never leave my side again and I did my best to ensure you kept that promise.”

Will’s eyes shone in the half-light, his hand moving restlessly until Hannibal felt the weak squeeze. “You asked me something. Did I dream that?”

He squeezed back, smiling softly. “It was no dream. I intended to have a plan before discussing it with you, but with Brown’s attack, I realized how foolish it is to wait. Marry me, Will, and you will be elevated to a protected status within the Family.”

Rather than overjoyed, Will looked perplexed and lurking in his eyes was fear that Hannibal didn’t understand. “I want you to marry me because you love me, not because you want to protect me.”

A new, stabbing pain tore through Hannibal’s chest and it took him a moment to realize it wasn’t physical, but emotional. His heart constricting in fear that Will would refuse him after everything that had happened. Taking Will’s hand in both of his, he asked, “Can it not serve both purposes?”

Will’s expression didn’t change, but Hannibal saw the fear growing within him and heard it laced throughout his words. “We are men of bold action, but this may be going too far. What church would recognize our marriage?”

Hannibal hadn’t thought Will a religious person, but the question intrigued him. “Do you need our union to be blessed by a church?”

Will huffed, “No,” but immediately added, “No one’s going to marry two men.”

Hannibal understood it was a life-changing event, but the protests Will was coming up with were merely excuses, not the reasons for his reluctance. “I’m sure with my connections, I can find one person to officiate.”

Annoyance twisted Will’s features as he protested, “I haven’t even agreed to marry you!”

Hannibal studied Will's flushed face, his fear-spiked scent, his avoiding gaze and ignored his words. He heard fear, not Will, and needed for Will to understand this was just as terrifying for him. "I've never thought of marriage for myself, nor children to carry on my legacy. I have legal papers filed that upon my death, my chosen successor for the Organization would be named. Though the name would change, my Organization would live on, and that was enough. Then you introduced yourself to me, my perfect chameleon, and I was lost."

"My greatest fear," he brought Will's hand to his mouth, kissing the knuckles, "My greatest fear is losing you. To no longer have you in my life. I wish for you to be by my side for the rest of our lives, sharing the responsibilities of the Organization as my equal."

"You can't make me a *Don*," Will exclaimed, though he was beginning to smile. A beatific, radiant smile that reflected elation from deep inside. "I'd be content as your—spouse, husband, whatever you want to call me. But I can't take partial control of your Organization."

"You aren't taking it, I'm offering it to you," Hannibal answered, shooting a warning glare at his future spouse. "And you're my legally named successor, so the Organization will be one hundred percent yours upon my death whether we're married or not."

He had rendered Will speechless. Reading Will's thoughts and the pleading in his eyes, Hannibal bent down and met Will's parted lips in a kiss, so gentle and warm it brought tears to Hannibal's eyes. "Will you kiss me like that at our wedding?" he murmured against Will's lips.

Eyes sparkling, Will replied, "Yes."

Trading soft kisses until his energy waned, Hannibal stole one last kiss and then sat back in his chair, relieving the strain on his abdomen. "Before we can get to our wedding, we must deal with the inquiry the inner circle insists for you."

Will's blissful expression disappeared under his hardened features. "Before he shot you, Matthew told me that the Family needed to be protected. He must have figured out we were back together and decided I was too much of a liability, and you were compromised as the Head of the Family. He thought to eliminate us both and start fresh with a new Don."

Will's theory wasn't far off from Hannibal's speculation and it was a disturbing thought, that one of his own would think the Organization better without him. "He could no longer trust me to make the best decisions for the Family, because of my involvement with you."

"That's only part of it," Will replied sadly. "He said he loved me right before he stabbed me. If his only concern was your competence as Don, he could have taken it to the lieutenants. Instead, he tried to kill both of us with all the lieutenants and half the Family as witnesses. He wanted to martyr himself for love. I hadn't worked up the courage to break it off with him, but I also wouldn't let him get intimate with me. I disrespected him. I left him no options and I underestimated him."

Hannibal could sense the self-recrimination in Will and wanted to alleviate it, but he knew that only Will could forgive himself. He traced his thumb over Will's stubbled cheek as he said, "You have a plan."

Will nodded as his eyelids started to droop. “I’ve had weeks to think about what the inner circle wants from me.” Will’s eyes slipped closed before he forced them back open. “I’m sorry, I’m just so tired.”

Hannibal cupped Will cheek before bracing himself to stand, feeling his own energy diminished. “I must rest as well. We’ll talk again this afternoon when I visit.” He saw the flit of worry in Will’s gaze and offered a reassuring smile. “The inner circle won’t make a move without my approval.”

He was halfway to the door when he stopped at the weak calling of his name. “How soon can we be married?”

Will’s eyes were closed and his features slack with exhaustion, but Hannibal knew his sharp mind was awaiting his answer. “As soon as I’m able to find an officiant, we will be wed, even if it’s in this hospital room,” he promised. “Wedding decorations are traditionally white, so it will save time.”

Soft laugher preceded Will’s eyes fluttering open, staring at him with fond exasperation. “This sterile environment won’t be conducive to what I have planned for our wedding bed.”

The first, rekindled stirrings of desire awoke in Hannibal, a pleasant feeling he hadn’t realized he missed until that exact moment. “I’m holding you to that promise.”

Hannibal didn’t bother to school his features as he left Will’s room, trailing his withering gaze over the assembled lieutenants. Protecting their Don was one thing; hovering like vultures was quite another. “He was awake for a few moments but isn’t strong enough to speak,” he informed them as he made his way back to his room. “You will not enter his room or attempt to communicate with him in any fashion without my presence, is that clear?”

“But Mr. Lecter—” Buddish started to protest, his words dying as Hannibal grasped him by his collar.

“*Both of us* nearly died in Brown’s attack. Whatever it is you hope to gain from interrogating Graham is not as important as our health, is that understood?” Hannibal growled, shoving Buddish away and continuing to his room. Only once he was inside the privacy of his room did Hannibal allow the pain to overtake him, his shoulder and leg throbbing from overexertion.

He stretched out on the bed and chuckled quietly to himself, the irony of the flesh being too weak for what the spirit was willing to do sending a wave of melancholy through him. He fell into a deep sleep, exhausted from his own recovery.

After lunch, he made his way back to Will’s room and was pleased to see him alert and waiting for him. “Hannibal.”

“Will.” He shuffled over and sat down, clasping Will’s outstretched hand. “You look much improved.”

Color was high on Will's cheeks, not from fever but excitement. "I'm eager to be out of here. I've had enough of hospitals for a lifetime." Hannibal's hand was squeezed firmly. "I also have a promise to keep."

Hannibal smiled warmly. "You've kept all your promises to me, I have no doubt you will fulfill the latest." His smile faded. "But that isn't what I'm here to speak to you about."

Will's sigh was a bone-deep tired that Hannibal felt as well. "The inner circle wants to know if I conspired with Matthew to kill you. It's absurd considering the damage he did to me first, but they don't want to sully the Brown legacy. And neither do I."

Will's loyalty was merely one thing that Hannibal loved about him, but this was taking it too far. "He tried to kill me. His legacy is destroyed beyond repair. No," he stopped Will's protest. "I understand why you want to preserve his family's legacy, but speaking the truth about a dead man is not disloyal. I want you to tell them about us. About our break up and reunion, and how you tried to honor Brown by sparing him the disgrace of sleeping with him after our reconciliation."

He watched as Will's mind turned over the proposal, studying it from all angles and looking for a flaw in its design. When Will resurfaced, it was with a solemn set to his mouth. "I brought disgrace to the Family by my actions. I seduced a respected member of the Family to make you jealous. Matthew was so enraged when he found out that he tried to kill me and in a blind fit of jealousy, tried to kill you."

Hearing the truth twisted by Will's mind was sickening, but Hannibal immediately saw how the Family would interpret what had transpired. "I should have announced our involvement right from the start," he mused angrily. "By my silence, I've brought this on you."

"I brought this on myself by wanting to protect you," Will scowled. "They'll want me to formally exonerate Matthew of any wrongdoing and take full responsibility for his actions. They'll demand my life for putting you in danger."

Anger coursed through Hannibal's veins, strengthening his tired body. "They can do *nothing*," he seethed. "Only I have the authority to pass judgement." Eyes glittering dangerously, he asked, "Do you remember my response the last time you said you would do anything for me?"

Eyes widening with lust, Will breathed, "Yes."

Leaning over Will, he poured all of his love, all of his rage into a kiss, feeling the answering fire in Will's grip on his hair, pulling him closer.

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At the week's end, they were gathered in Will's hospital room, Hannibal watching each of his lieutenants carefully as they asked their questions. Will's assessment had been fairly accurate, with the questions deliberately leading to the answer the inner circle clearly wanted: Matthew's unwilling participation in Will's tangled web of seduction.

Will was stoic through the interrogation, giving brief answers and looking each questioner directly in the eye as if daring them to embarrass him. If they were looking for Will to cave under the pressure, they didn't know the man at all. Will had endured more than some of them had growing up within the Family; their opposition merely fueled his strength.

When Pazzi repeated a question with a more sinister angle, Hannibal spoke for the first time. "That's enough. If you haven't made up your minds by now, more questions won't bring the answers you seek."

Fascinated, Hannibal watched as most of his trusted inner circle began to squirm. Buddish looked expectantly at each member in turn. Zeller dropped his gaze to the floor while Silvestri turned away from Buddish's stare, as did Doemling, Raspail and a few others. Whatever had transpired in the months leading up to this inquiry, Will's guilt had already been decided but not fully agreed upon.

"We don't need to deliberate," Buddish confirmed his suspicions. "We've made our decision."

Hannibal leveled the full weight of his glare at Buddish. "Your minds were made up before you walked into this room. Why go through the farce of questioning Mr. Graham? To appease the rules? To soothe your consciences?" Buddish defiantly met his stare, not backing down and Hannibal's need for vengeance roared within him. "I said you were done questioning Mr. Graham. I didn't say you were finished with the interrogation." He paused for effect. "You may begin questioning me, now."

Mild chaos followed, their indignant voices rising until the noise became deafening. Hannibal raised his hand and it took only a few seconds for them to quiet down, though most were visibly distressed by his announcement. "Mr. Graham wasn't the only one attacked by Mr. Brown. It's only fair that you interview both of his victims."

"We can't do that, Mr. Lecter," Zeller pleaded with him, voice tinged with regret.

"Are you saying I'm above the judgement of the Family?" he tested them. "I believed that I had earned your trust and respect. If that's no longer the case, I wish to know it. If you no longer want me as Head of the Organization, now is the time to say so and appoint another."

He had disarmed his inner circle with the exception of Buddish. Only Buddish had a smile teasing at his lips, anticipation swirling around him like a tornado. "Getting involved with a member of your own Family was a grievous error in judgement. Choosing someone with such a dangerous, unpredictable past as Graham was reckless and put this Family at risk. You fucking him was the reason Hobbs came after us."

Hannibal laughed quietly in the face of such hubris. "Have you forgotten Carlo Deogracias so easily? He and his brother were members of this Family who planned my assassination with Hobbs. By the records that you uncovered, Deogracias had been paying Hobbs for months before I even met Will Graham." He dropped his voice to a dangerous timber. "And before you attempt to say that Mr. Graham was in on that, remember that you also did a thorough background check on Mr. Graham in addition to the one I ordered and found no such collusion."

Uncomfortable silence followed his pronouncement until Will spoke, drawing all eyes to him sitting on the bed. “You all know how proud Matthew was of belonging to this Family. I’m not out to destroy his legacy. No one can know what was in his heart that day, but I’ve told you everything I know and it’s up to you to interpret his words and actions. As for myself…”

Will sighed and rubbed his forehead as if he had a headache. “I chose this Family because of its progressive ideas and how I saw the lowest workers being treated. The real testament of an Organization’s character is not how they treat those at the top, but those whose names will be forgotten.”

Hannibal couldn’t tell what part of Will’s performance was real; the weariness he could see pinching around Will’s eyes imparted more credibility to Will’s vulnerable demeanor. “When I asked to join this Family, I pledged my loyalty the same as all of you, willing to give my life for my Don. Our actions define us, not what’s in our past. I’ve killed and nearly been killed for this Family. Mr. Lecter’s asked me numerous times what I was willing to do for the Family and my answer has always been the same: anything.”

Hannibal let the weight of Will’s pause linger for a moment before he said, “If I asked you again what you’re willing to endure for this Family, knowing your fate resides with those gathered here, what would your answer be?”

Will’s voice rang with quiet authority, “Anything.”

Hannibal pushed himself out of his chair, slipping the Family ring off his pinky as he walked over to Will. He didn’t have the resources to get a copy made from his hospital room, more concerned with the basic necessities of the plan they had worked out over the last few days. “I gave you an ultimatum the last time you uttered that word,” he said for the lieutenants’ benefit; Will needed no reminding. “If you answered ‘anything’, I swore I would take everything.”

Will met his gaze boldly, a smile teasing at the corners of his mouth. “Yes, you did.”

“I’ll start with your freedom.” Hannibal picked up Will’s hand and slid the ring onto his pinky. To the accompaniment of gasps behind him, he brought Will’s hand up to kiss the ring, then Will’s knuckles, enfolding Will’s hand in his. “Marry me, Will Graham, forsaking all others, and take your place at my side as my equal.”

A bark of laughter mixed in with the curious murmurs of the lieutenants, Buddish muttering louder than everyone, “Poor time for a joke.”

Will was solemn as he stated, “Promise to let me fight my own battles and bear the consequences of my actions.” It was something Will insisted be spoken aloud for the inner circle to hear. From the pitch of the murmurs, there was approval amongst the lieutenants at Will’s declaration.

Buddish continued grumbling just loud enough to be heard: “This is a joke. It has to be a joke.”

Ignoring Buddish and trying to contain the smile he could feel wanting to burst forth, Hannibal said, “Equally share in the duties for the day-to-day operation of the Organization and collaborate with me on decisions brought before the Organization.”

Will’s eyes sparkled in defiance as he asked, “Who will have final say on the decisions we make?”

Hannibal allowed the smile to bloom, as his joy could no longer be contained. “I will, as Head of the Organization. You, as the Heart of the Organization, will be its conscience. As my spouse, I give you control over the casinos and back rooms. Your decisions regarding the workers’ contracts and working conditions are final.”

Apparently that was the breaking point for Buddish as he leapt from his chair and yelled, “You can’t marry that *whore*!”

Will seemed oblivious to Buddish’s interruptions, his dazed expression giving way to a blinding smile. Will hadn’t known that Hannibal intended to give him such a large responsibility within the Organization, and his smile wiped every last bit of exhaustion from his expression.

Hannibal saw the determination in Will’s eyes before the tug on his hand and leaned into Will’s sweet, loving kiss. “I love you,” was murmured against his lips, Hannibal’s reply to deepen the kiss and seal their union.

A nervous throat-clearing reluctantly drew them out of their bubble of happiness. “Mr. Lecter. Mr. Graham.” Price was standing on the other side of Will’s bed, their marriage license in hand.

“This is sick,” Buddish continued to rant, trying to get a closer look at what Price had. “What are you doing? What is that?” Buddish demanded, trying to take the paper away from Price, but Zeller and Silvestri stepped in, blocking his path.

“They got married, you idiot,” Silvestri snapped as Hannibal signed his name, passing the pen to Will.

Will signed his name as Buddish spat, “There’s no preacher. It isn’t legal!”

As Price scurried out of the room, Hannibal turned his full wrath to Buddish. “As a favor to me, Judge Renaldo appointed Mr. Price as a deputy clerk, granting him celebrant status. What you just witnessed was my legal and binding marriage to Will, officiated by Mr. Price and witnessed by Mr. Silvestri and Miss Katz.”

“Furthermore,” he cut off Buddish’s rant, “Per the Articles of the Organization, the rights and privileges of the Head of the Organization are assumed by the spouse. While the rule was originally drafted for instances of marriages between Families, there is nothing that says it can’t be extended to intra-Family marriage. Everything in our vows is binding.”

“We’ll fight this. You can’t marry him!” Buddish turned to the rest of the inner circle, but their hardened faces said he stood on his own in his objection.

“If you won’t support our union, I’ll terminate your association with the Family,” Hannibal threatened. He could see the agreement in his lieutenants’ faces; whatever Buddish had said or did to coerce them into siding with him, now he stood alone.

Buddish yanked his arms from Zeller and Silvestri and stormed out of the room, the tension leaving with him.

Zeller was the first to break the silence. “Congratulations,” he offered with a weak smile, extending his hand to Will. “I’m real sorry for how we treated you. Buddish had us convinced…”

“Zeller,” Will interrupted him as he took the offered hand. “You stood up for us when it counted. You defended your Don’s decision. I don’t take that lightly. Thank you.”

Zeller broke into a relieved smile as he shook Will’s hand. “Thank you, Will…Mr. Graham.” He chuckled self-consciously. “It’ll take some time to get used to calling you that again.”

Hannibal could see that Will wanted to object but he shook his head minutely in warning. Will needed to accept his new role at the top of the Organization and respectful titles were part of that.

Curiously, Zeller didn’t move away after Will’s nod of dismissal. He still had hold of Will’s hand, and with a wary glance over to Hannibal, Zeller started to go down on one knee to offer his respect.

“Zeller—no,” Will admonished before Hannibal could stop him. Will urged Zeller back to his feet, his neck flushed with embarrassment. “I appreciate the gesture, but I want to earn your respect.” Will raised his voice. “The same goes for everyone in the Organization. I will accept your respect when you believe I’ve earned it. I don’t want blind loyalty because it’s expected. I want to earn it.”

Will already sounded like a leader; Hannibal couldn’t be prouder. It was as if with their marriage, Will shared in his confidence as well as his Organization. Their Organization.

“Thank you, Mr. Zeller.” Will shook Zeller’s hand once more, then accepted the next lieutenant’s congratulations. Hannibal gave quiet thanks as he shook his lieutenant’s hands, assuring them that discussions would take place with the inner circle when he and Will were both out of the hospital.

When the last person filed out of the room, Will slumped in his bed and Hannibal sank into a chair, both of them groaning quietly at the stresses their healing bodies had undergone. “I could sleep for a week,” Will moaned, eyes already closing.

Knowing he should get back to his own bed before his leg refused to support him, Hannibal nevertheless stayed a few minutes more, waiting for Will to fall asleep.

“It’s technically our wedding night,” Will murmured, eyes slitting open to stare at him. “Sleep with me.”

Hannibal's heart skipped a beat, even knowing that wasn't what Will meant. With a quiet sigh, Hannibal slipped in beside Will, the narrow bed barely able to hold them both. But as they shifted around carefully, Hannibal had Will's back pressed against his chest and Will holding tight to his hand wrapped around Will's waist, contentment flowing through him.

"Goodnight, my husband," he whispered into Will's hair, the curls tickling his nose.

"Goodnight, my husband," Will murmured back, Hannibal feeling the smile pull at his face.

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Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will return to Lecter House, but Will has some adjustments to make. Oh, and they consummate their marriage, but not without a few obstacles getting in the way first.

Tags for this chapter: Frottage, Anal Sex

Will had half-heartedly listened to his female clients prattle on about how marriage changed them or their husbands, but now, he sympathized.

His life was no longer his own to manage. Who he was allowed to meet with, how he spoke to them, even how he dressed was all dictated by Organization procedures.

Propriety clashed with the friendships he'd worked so hard to build within the Family. Beverly treating him differently hurt at first, but he reluctantly accepted that his elevated status meant a certain distance from those who reported to him, Beverly included.

He was used to standing near the back of the room during Family meetings, but now he sat at Hannibal's right, expected to offer his opinions on the issues. The lieutenants were wary of his ideas and he didn't blame them. Hannibal's crash courses in the fundamentals of running a Family while they recuperated in bed were not a substitute for advancing through the ranks

and learning at a steady pace. Will's head swam with rules and procedures most nights, trying to assimilate the new information Hannibal dictated to him as he fell asleep.

His imagination was his saving grace, helping him discover the underlying problems at the heart of some disagreements. Airing of the true grievances, rather than the petty arguments that covered them up, earned him grudging respect from the ranks.

At least he'd pleased Hannibal with his choice of bodyguard, though Will had argued the need for one. Jimmy Price had been thrilled at the promotion, so at least some good was coming from Will's misery.

It wasn't that he didn't want to learn. He was mesmerized by the hand-bound books with brittle pages Hannibal gave him to study. He enjoyed listening to Hannibal reminisce about his early days as Head of the Family and how he'd handled certain situations, giving Will experience by proxy. He didn't even mind giving up his apartment, instructing Jimmy where to pull up the floorboards to retrieve all of his hidden belongings.

No, his misery was confined strictly to the bedroom.

Coming back to Lecter House after finally being released from the hospital had been a quiet affair, Hannibal and Will agreeing with their lieutenants that the less people who knew they would be on the move, the better.

They'd arrived late at night, bleary-eyed with exhaustion, and Will didn't realize until morning that he'd followed Hannibal into his master bedroom. Waking up to the blue bedspread and matching curtains, the dark mahogany furniture and family heirlooms, had filled him with a profound sense of intimacy. Hannibal loved him enough, trusted him enough, to let him into his inner sanctum, and seeing photos of young Hannibal with his parents had brought that all home.

Will luxuriated in the comforts that Hannibal enjoyed: the fine linens, firm mattress and the scented oils in the bath that eased his tight muscles. In the rare moments he had to himself, Will poured over the worn-smooth books lining the shelves and the small album of family portraits going back four generations. Seeing Hannibal's great-great grandparents posing in front of a stately manor, next to a horse and carriage, reminded him of royalty.

His clothes that were deemed suitable for his new status hung next to Hannibal's suits. His shoes were shinier than he'd ever seen them, his shirts pressed and collars starched.

Hannibal had gifted him his mother's jewelry box for his rings and pocket watches, the matched box set residing on top of the dresser.

Will's precious photos were placed alongside Hannibal's family on the shelves: his parents' wedding photo, his christening photo, and the one he'd stolen of Phyllis Crawford, promising to tell Hannibal about her one day.

It was everything he could've wanted, but he felt out of sorts. He'd been restless before they'd left the hospital, and every night it had only gotten worse as he slid into bed beside Hannibal and kissed him goodnight.

He craved the taste of Hannibal's skin. He wanted to map each of Hannibal's new scars. He longed to force Hannibal's mouth down on his dick and hold him there until he choked. He wanted to fulfill the promise he'd made to Hannibal, and himself, on the day of their engagement.

But he couldn't get it up. His body was still in shock from the infections and surgery and no matter how long he tried, he could only get half hard. The effort wasn't worth it as it left him sore and resentful.

He knew Hannibal shared the same misery, as he'd seen the same forlorn desperation in Hannibal's eyes that he saw every morning staring back at him in the mirror.

Even kissing left them short-tempered, the urgency of their minds not translating to their bodies. Emotionally drained, they wrapped themselves around each other to sleep, legs tangled together and breath against stubbled cheeks, but it was not the intimacy Will ached to share in their marriage bed.

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Will scowled at his reflection. He was seven months past his last haircut and it was so long it hung down over his eyes. He added more cream to smooth it back, but it wouldn't be tamed. He had woken up in a foul mood and his unruly hair was the final crack in his frayed control. "Where are the scissors?" he demanded, passing Hannibal on the way to the side table.

He distantly heard Hannibal's wary answer, "Why?"

Not bothering to answer, Will stabbed his thumb with the tip of the blade as he pulled the scissors from the drawer. Holding up a chunk of hair, he lifted his other arm, scissors at the ready, when his wrist was grabbed.

Hannibal stood before him, stormy eyes threatening violence. "Drop them or I'll snap your wrist."

Will jerked his hand down but Hannibal's grip was firm and only tightened as he struggled. "Fuck you," he snarled, putting more effort into escaping Hannibal's grip.

Desire flared hot and bright in Hannibal's eyes, no longer dulled by illness. "Will…" he growled before crushing their mouths together.

Will fought back, teeth clamping down on Hannibal's invading tongue and his free hand grabbing a fistful of Hannibal's hair to pull him away.

That's when he felt it: the heat of Hannibal's erection pressing against his hip. He was so shocked that he stopped fighting and Hannibal took full advantage, grabbing his ass and bringing their bodies flush.

Hannibal's relieved groan reverberated down his spine, sparking a cascade of molten lava through his veins. Thunderous arousal began to thicken his dick, his own moan of relief swallowed by Hannibal.

The scissors clattered to the floor as Will grabbed Hannibal's shirt and forced it off his shoulders. The welcome burn of arousal, sharp and sweet, sang through him as Hannibal's tongue slicked against his, hands impatiently shoving at clothes. They stumbled to the bed, falling across it as the last of their clothes were shed, kissing anywhere they could reach.

Will clawed at Hannibal's back, sucked at his shoulder and hooked his leg around the backs of Hannibal's knees, bracing himself as Hannibal rolled them over, Will now able to bite at Hannibal's chest. Moaning at seeing Hannibal's firm erection and rubbing his own against Hannibal's thigh, Will bit harder as fingers curled into his hair and pulled.

At the retaliating growl and harsher tug, Will barked, "You want me to suck you or not?"

Another painful tug and Will had to obey, crawling up Hannibal's body and delving deep into his mouth. Hannibal rolled his hips, Will's moving to meet him as the kiss went from desperate to sloppy, their harsh breaths making it impossible to maintain the kiss.

Will stared down into Hannibal's dark eyes as their bodies moved against each other in perfect counterpoint. Each lost to their own pleasure, heightened by the other's desire, Will felt Hannibal's love for him in the fingertips digging possessively into his hips. His arms started to shake from the strain of holding himself up and Hannibal's face was red from exertion, but soon Will felt the glorious pull at the base of his spine.

He lowered himself until he could press his forehead to Hannibal's shoulder, breathing hotly over Hannibal's skin as his orgasm broke over him, tears of relief stinging his eyes.

He heard Hannibal's soft moan and felt the warm release against his stomach, Hannibal's arms coming around his shoulders to hold him close. "Fuck, I needed that," Will murmured, nosing his way up Hannibal's neck to suck lightly at skin.

"As did I," Hannibal admitted in a low voice, pressing gentle kisses along Will's jaw.

Will tipped his head to intercept Hannibal's mouth, stealing light, teasing kisses. Sated, red-rimmed eyes met his. All the tension had drained from Hannibal's face, leaving him soft and relaxed. Will imagined he looked similarly relieved. "Good morning, husband," Will grinned.

Hannibal chuckled lightly, arms tightening around Will's waist. "It certainly is, now that I've decided we're spending the day in bed."

To hear Hannibal brush off their duties as Heads of the Family shocked Will. "But we have meetings," he argued, knowing Hannibal's day was as full as his, the months they'd been laid up in the hospital leaving a huge backlog of issues to resolve.

Hannibal leveled a glare at him, the effect ruined by the affection that bled into his expression. "We've worked non-stop since coming home. We've been married six weeks and this morning was the first time I was able to fuck my husband."

He'd never heard Hannibal use rough language before and it nearly sent him into meltdown, Will's breathing growing deeper as his reawakened hunger returned. "Say that again," he rasped.

Hannibal's hand slipped into Will's hair, angling him down for a slow kiss. "Which part?" was murmured against Will's lips. "'My husband' or 'fuck my husband'?"

"Fuck…me. I want you to fuck me," Will pleaded softly, gazing down at Hannibal. No fear, no trepidation, just a low, insistent desire to be as close to Hannibal as possible. He slid his hand down Hannibal's side to squeeze a hip. "I want to share everything with you."

Eyes glittering with tears, Hannibal kissed him softly. "You're sharing your life. I'll ask nothing more of you."

Will stifled the flare of annoyance at Hannibal's continued deference. "You haven't asked—I'm offering. I've had so little control over my own life that I clung to the one thing I could control. I've never been afraid of the act itself, only the perceived consequences." He dug his fingernails deep into Hannibal's hip, enjoying the spark of pain that lit Hannibal's gaze. "I'm the Head of an Organization, now. No one can touch me."

That warm, melting feeling returned to his limbs as Hannibal coaxed him into a soul-deep, shattering kiss. "I'll kill anyone who tries," Hannibal promised, rolling them over and settling on Will.

Warmth broke over Will's body as he took Hannibal's weight, a fierce need to protect his husband nearly choking him. "I'll kill anyone who attempts to hurt you again," he replied, sealing his vow with a kiss that turned savage. Teeth pulled and nipped, more animalistic than loving, but it matched what was in his heart.

He felt the answering sting of Hannibal's teeth on his lower lip, the heat of bruises raising beneath the skin of his neck and chest. Will's nails raked across Hannibal's back and down his spine, his teeth leaving deep impressions in Hannibal's shoulder.

Once again, their bodies weren't able to keep up with their minds, but their desire had been slaked for the time being. Teeth gentling to soft sucks of lips and fingernails softening to stroking fingertips, they eased into a gentle, low ebb of arousal.

Warm and sated, Will felt himself drifting to sleep, the weight of his husband increasing as Hannibal nuzzled half-heartedly at his neck.

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Will danced at the edge of *too much*, his body pushed closer and closer to orgasm but denied that final release by Hannibal.

If Will thought he was in love before, now he *ached*, his fingers slipping over Hannibal's sweat-slick back, unable to find purchase. The bend of his body wasn't the most comfortable, the pressure on the abdominal scar tissue increasing as Hannibal changed the angle of penetration, drawing another weak groan from Will.

What had started with caution and care—Hannibal distracting him from the discomfort of the unfamiliar—slowly transitioned to exploratory. The oil that had been brought up with their ignored breakfast eased the way for Hannibal's fingers, then the head of his erection, Will so

lost inside his own pleasure that he barely noticed the difference, only the sense of completion.

With each in-and-out drag of Hannibal within him, Will's confidence grew along with his arousal. Feet sliding up Hannibal's legs to wrap around his waist, Will pushed up into Hannibal's lazy thrusts, silently demanding *more*.

Greedy hands pulled Hannibal down into even greedier kisses, softly whispered pleas tempting Hannibal to lose himself in their joining.

Hannibal's only concession was to lower himself to his elbows, making it easier to pull Will's soft grunts and sighs into himself, feeding his desire back to him in an unending cycle.

Hannibal's gaze was so intense it was hard to maintain eye contact, but Will couldn't look away. A look of wonderment would pass over Hannibal's features, or his eyes would unfocus and then snap to Will's, so unguarded it *hurt*. To see Hannibal brought to such a vulnerable, emotional state was humbling, and Will kissed him sweetly, letting him know it was okay to let go.

After hours or days, Will's sense of time was lost along with everything else unimportant, Hannibal's slow and deliberate hip rolls gave way to more forceful, urgent thrusts.

Every nerve was alight in Will's body, the constant waves of pleasure slowly drowning him and he gladly gave himself over to it.

Hannibal shifted his hips and something inside Will shattered, white-hot pleasure blinding him and leaving him gasping. Before he could catch his breath, Hannibal pounded into him again, hitting that same spot and causing stars to dance in Will's vision.

He barely felt Hannibal's hands tilting his hips. Nothing in his life could have prepared him for the devastating ecstasy that followed Hannibal's next thrusts, so deep that it felt as though his bones would splinter with the force.

"I would hold us…here…forever if I…could," Hannibal gasped out between thrusts, shocking Will by stroking his long-neglected dick.

It was a quiet, intense orgasm, sinking through his skin and bones into the very marrow of his being. Blinded and deafened, Will let himself become a receptacle, absorbing everything that was Hannibal, giving everything of himself in return. It was a luxurious, dizzying sensation, as if he were floating outside his body.

Loud, harsh breathing dragged him back. He blinked sweat out of his eyes only to see Hannibal's head resting on his shoulder. His legs were still clamped tightly around Hannibal's waist and he felt the stretch of Hannibal still inside him.

Neither of them moved, Will belatedly realizing he was lightly scratching Hannibal's head, the damp hair clinging to his fingers. The warm, humid air surrounding them stank of sex, coating their skin in a film of sweat.

The high of his orgasm faded, bringing to the fore the aches and strained muscles of his cramped position. He eased his legs down, intending to stretch them out beside Hannibal's, but the pull deep inside him halted his movements. "Hannibal." He winced at the word, his throat feeling like he'd screamed for hours, dry and scratchy.

The head stirred beneath his hand, then a warning was mumbled against his chest, "This may hurt." As Hannibal slowly pulled out, Will sucked in a breath, holding it as overstimulated nerves screamed in protest.

He choked on the exhale, feeling his fingers being removed from deep in Hannibal's shoulder and forced to release their grip on Hannibal's hair. He shivered as Hannibal kissed each of his palms, tongue soothing along the pads of each finger.

"The physical pain is inconsequential next to the emotional distress of being separated from you," Hannibal murmured into his hand.

Will slid his palm to cup Hannibal's face and rubbed his thumb against Hannibal's upper lip in a soothing rhythm. "You're a part of me," he whispered, drawing Hannibal's questioning gaze. "We're a part of each other. We can never be separated."

Hannibal's eyes shone in the morning light. "I would move heaven and earth if only you asked."

Will was unable to hide his grimace at the tickling sensation of fluid slipping out of his ass. "The only thing I need now is to piss." He bristled at the knowing look Hannibal shot him, but accepted the hand that helped him to stand, his legs not quite steady enough to hold him for a few seconds. Hannibal's warm, broad palm circled his hip, steadying him, and Will found it difficult to swallow around the lump in his throat.

He cleaned himself up quickly, but then lost himself in his reflection, bruises coming to life across his skin. Lips, neck, shoulders, upper chest, even his hip, all bore evidence of Hannibal's mouth on him. Warmth spread in a similar path down his chest, the urgent need to see his own marks on Hannibal sending him back to bed.

As if he'd anticipated Will's actions, Hannibal was on full display, propped up on pillows with his hands behind his head, long legs stretched out before him. With a saucy grin, Will settled on Hannibal's thighs, fingertips tracing the teeth marks just below Hannibal's clavicle. He skimmed over the deep indentations from his fingernails all along Hannibal's shoulders, the bruises forming on his throat, and suspected he'd find lines of red all across Hannibal's back where he knew he'd scratched.

All during his inspection, Hannibal radiated satisfaction. "Your exuberance was quite a sight to behold," Hannibal said with an unbearably smug grin.

Will held his tongue in his teeth to hold back the barb about emotions getting the better of Hannibal, knowing it would be taken as an insult. "We bring out the possessiveness in each other," he declared instead, matching his fingers to the marks on Hannibal's shoulders before leaning forward, hovering a hair's breath away from Hannibal's parted lips. "I own you as much as you own me."

It was the briefest flutter of emotion in Hannibal's eyes that let Will know he'd misspoken, but the brush of lips said it was inconsequential. "One cannot own something whose nourishment comes from independence. That which flourishes in the light, unfettered and unchained, free to create and become whatever is desired. It can be held for a time, but must always be released so it can continue to evolve."

Will blinked away the sting in his eyes, moved beyond measure at Hannibal's words. "I've spent my life adapting and evolving to ever-changing circumstances, never feeling the earth solid under my feet. I'm not the same man who asked for your audience four years ago," he murmured, edging closer so each word caused his lips to brush Hannibal's. "Your trust in me…I know you went against the inner circle's advice."

"They didn't have the capacity to see your potential," Hannibal whispered, dragging the tip of his tongue lightly along Will's lower lip. "The darkness in you, your possessiveness that has painted my body, your capacity for great violence and great understanding…" he sighed. "You are my equal in every way."

The ache in Will's chest spread, a need to be closer, to become one being, to *love* until it killed both of them. "Love is too small a word for what I feel for you," he breathed, surging up into a kiss. He claimed and was claimed in return, leaving fresh nail marks down Hannibal's chest as they sank deeper and deeper into the kiss.

Bodies too worn out to participate, Will satisfied his need to *merge* with Hannibal by touch and taste, placing reverent kisses on the three puckered scars—above his right pectoral, the abdomen just left of the belly button, and the middle of the right thigh. The quiet sigh and gentle hands in his hair guided him back up, urging him to his knees. He braced his hands on the wall as Hannibal skimmed his lips over the three ragged scars on Will's abdomen, lingering on the surgically precise one that had saved his life, hands clasping his thighs loosely.

Will's voice was hoarse with emotion as he asked, "Can we try this next?" He nudged his hips forward, though Hannibal had clearly been thinking the same thing. Will shuddered as Hannibal placed a sucking kiss to his limp dick, sensitivity still running high.

"I will indulge your every fantasy, if you'll trust me with them," Hannibal promised, a lingering darkness beneath his words causing another shudder to run through Will.

"What fantasies have you harbored about me?" he asked, knowing it was a dangerous question.

Instead of answering, a daring light shone from Hannibal's eyes. Will was borne down to the bed and covered by Hannibal, lips parting eagerly to Hannibal's insistent mouth. Will couldn't get a read on Hannibal, the wandering hands traversing already covered territory. Even the quick tease over Will's sore hole was only that; a tease, and Will suspected Hannibal intended to surprise him with a fantasy one night while he was insensate from orgasm. He didn't think he'd mind whatever Hannibal proposed to him, as long as it brought them both pleasure.

As Hannibal’s kisses gentled and he shifted to lay by Will’s side, Will followed, unwilling to be separated from Hannibal even in sleep as they dozed again.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

> This chapter has a little bit of everything. The honeymoon continues. An unknown enemy threatens Lecter-Graham House. It's Hannibal's turn to reveal a secret from his past. Will confronts Crawford.
>
> Tags for this chapter: Rough Sex, Rimming, They Flip!, They Switch!, Canon-Typical Violence, Angst

Will's enthusiasm for Hannibal's darker suggestions called to the beast inside him. The more daring suggestions didn't deter Will unless they interfered with his breathing, and those were politely declined. But Will did allow Hannibal—once—to choke him while on his hands and knees, a hand around his throat squeezing gently as Hannibal brought him to orgasm.

Hannibal suspected it was more from the lack of eye contact to gauge intent rather than the act itself, because Will didn't hesitate to shove his erection down Hannibal's throat and keep it there when the mood suited. It was intoxicating, watching the darkness swirl in Will's eyes as Hannibal was held in place, tears leaking from his eyes at the enforced lack of air. To be used by such a cruel creature…to use him in equal measure, was beyond anything Hannibal could ever have hoped for.

Will had pulled the sheets off the mattress when Hannibal buried his face in Will's ass, a white-knuckled grip on the mattress and high-pitched moans broadcasting his enjoyment as Hannibal opened him with his tongue. The orgasm from Will's untouched erection had caused Will to shake uncontrollably for a solid minute, Hannibal holding him until the tremors subsided. The reciprocating blow job had been particularly sweet as Will's teeth deliberately slipped now and again, bringing Hannibal even greater enjoyment.

When he had asked Will to penetrate him, the ensuing hour had been akin to a spiritual revelation, a transcendent experience for them both. It became one of Will's favorite positions, slowly taking Hannibal apart and putting the pieces back together.

Will loved to snug his hips firmly against Hannibal's ass and curl over his body, a pillow absently shoved beneath Hannibal's lower back to hold him in place. Pinned by Will, Hannibal appeared powerless, subjected to the minute shift of Will's hips and the deep, deep kisses that left him lightheaded.

When Will had been on his knees, forcing Hannibal to curl further in on himself, Hannibal had taken full advantage. Dipping his fingers into the oil, he'd grabbed hold of Will's ass and slipped a finger inside, dark satisfaction blooming as Will's mouth fell open and his hips

jerked. Rather than anger, knowledge burned brightly in Will's eyes. "How deep can you go?"

Knowing what Will wanted, Hannibal's lip curled at the same instant as his finger, but the angle and strain on his body meant he couldn't quite reach that sweet spot inside. Hannibal forced his body into a deep V position and pressed two fingers inside Will, drinking in the sight of Will's shocked rapture and tensed body as Will orgasmed around his fingers.

Will had been easy to manhandle then, Hannibal rolling Will off of him and positioning him on his knees with his ass in the air. Oiling up his erection, Hannibal started to press it inside, Will's body giving easily while still in the throes of orgasm. Though Will's low moan was muffled by his face pressed half into the mattress, Hannibal felt it through the thin layers of skin that separated them.

Reaching for Will's still hard erection, he pressed his thumb firmly to the head, rubbing in small circles. Will's agonized groans grew in volume as Hannibal squeezed the shaft, milking Will until a hand clamped around his wrist, stilling his movements.

Hannibal released the softening flesh, only to take hold of Will's hips and hold him in place as he drove himself to completion, Will's groans threaded with pain every time he rubbed over Will's prostate.

Will had started on his elbows with his head pressed to the mattress, but now it hung low between his arms that were braced to withstand the force of Hannibal's punishing rhythm.

Pausing for breath, Hannibal pulled Will up flush against his chest, Will's body arched to keep Hannibal firmly seated inside him. Will's tired, needy gaze met his and Hannibal kissed the swollen bottom lip, blood smearing where Will had bitten through skin.

Hannibal knew he wouldn't last long in that position, so he dug his fingernail into Will's nipple and angled his hips upward, shifting until Will tensed against him and his thin, strung-out voice begged, "Nnn…no more."

So close to orgasm he could taste it, Hannibal nevertheless stilled his movements, rubbing the pad of his thumb over Will's abused nipple. "Do you truly wish me to stop?" he wheezed, heart pounding up into his throat.

Beguiling eyes met his. At the same time, Hannibal felt Will's nails digging into the back of his thigh, pressing their bodies tighter together. "Never," Will whispered, licking into his mouth and capturing Hannibal's tongue between his teeth. It was with a slow drag that Hannibal's tongue was released, Will's eyes glowing with affection.

An answering ache consumed Hannibal, feathering kisses up Will's sweat-slick neck to his ear, taking the lobe between his teeth to nibble. He resumed his devastating, pointed thrusts into Will's prostate as his lips skimmed down Will's neck, gathering a bit of skin between his teeth and biting down until he felt it give.

The metallic taste bursting across his tongue, the sting of Will's nails cutting into his thigh, the scent of blood and sweat and sex filling his nostrils sent Hannibal over the edge, his arms

crushing Will to him as he spent himself inside the willing, exhausted body.

It was the first time that Hannibal had drawn blood during sex, but Will's nails were deadly, delighting in cutting Hannibal's skin and shredding his control. With every dark smile that Will bestowed upon him after a vigorous bout of sex, Hannibal was more convinced that he had found his one and true equal in the world.

What moved him, even beyond their darker proclivities in the bedroom, were the days when Family knelt to give their respect to Will. Their first weeks back home from the hospital, it had only been those who had befriended Will, but now it was an almost daily occurrence. To see one of his Family taking a knee and bowing over Will's newly minted Family Crest ring caused a tightening in his chest and a fierce need to claim Will all over again.

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Near their one-year anniversary, their honeymoon period drew to a violent close. A courier delivered a large box that contained one of their newer recruits, his bones broken so he fit inside and body brutally sodomized. No Family claimed responsibility, no whispers or rumors on who or why, souring Hannibal's mood and leaving Will with little appetite.

The next month, a second body was delivered, every bone removed so the body could be turned inside out, muscles and tendons impaled with shards from a broken mirror. Enraged, Hannibal personally called upon each Don, wanting to look them in the eye and dare them to lie to him about their involvement.

Only du Maurier had a crack in her armor. "I believe with time, the scales will fall from your eyes," was her cryptic response to his terse inquiry.

Hannibal spoke with Will at length, trying to decipher du Maurier's words, but they were no closer to an answer when the third body was delivered, 29 days after the last one. It wasn't delivered until after dark, the courier admitting that no one wanted to touch a box coming to Lecter-Graham House for fear of what was inside. As much as Hannibal wanted to gut the man for his weakness, it was not the courier who was killing their people.

This time, the half of a face staring up at him from the box was Elliot Buddish. The other half was only bone, the skin and muscle peeled away and bone bleached pure white. Pieces of broken mirror were once again embedded under the skin, everywhere that Hannibal could see. Moonlight reflected off the mirrored chunks replacing the eyes and holding the mouth open.

Hannibal turned away in disgust and anger, the helpless feeling overwhelming him. He had never felt so useless, unable to protect their people because he didn't know who the enemy *was*.

"Moonlight…" Will murmured, staring down at the corpse. "What's today?" he asked no one in particular.

Miss Katz answered, "Wednesday."

Will dismissed her with an impatient wave of his hand. “No, not the *day*…when’s the full moon? Is it tonight?”

While most scrambled to find a calendar, Miss Katz went to the window. “Looks like it tonight.”

Hannibal knew the pained, distant look on Will’s face. “You’ve discovered a pattern,” he stated, not even a question.

The distance faded as Will focused on Buddish’s body. “Every 29 or 30 days, we’ve gotten a body.” Mr. Zeller handed Will a calendar and Will flipped back two months. “Full moon on each delivery night.”

Knowing the pattern didn’t magically give them the killer, but it was *something*. “We have approximately 29 days to figure out who is killing our Family,” Hannibal asserted, settling his gaze on each of the people in the room, ending on Will.

All the color drained from Will’s face. “Dragons have scales.”

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How du Maurier knew Dolarhyde was targeting their Family, Hannibal didn’t know, but going to her again would look suspicious. He only had Will to rely on and Will’s gift could only get them so far with such minimal evidence.

“I’m hesitant to suggest it, but maybe we need to call in the police,” Will said, arm thrown over his eyes as he stretched out on the couch. His relaxed pose fooled no one; every line of Will’s body was tense.

The idea of asking for help from those who had harassed him most of his life left a bad taste in Hannibal’s mouth. “Family problems need to be handled by the Family,” he reminded Will, though a small part of him wondered if Will was right. If Dolarhyde was responsible, his strategic planning had no equal, his patience to see a plan to fruition unending. To expose such a foe with enough evidence to satisfy the lieutenants and then capture him would take more skill that Hannibal possessed.

“I think this goes beyond a Family problem.” Will’s voice was subdued, lifting his arm to reveal his bloodshot eyes. He’d been plagued by nightmares since the second body was delivered, rejecting Hannibal’s offers of tonics to help him sleep. Will preferred to rest in the circle of Hannibal’s arms, but Hannibal knew sleep never returned once the nightmares concluded.

“Only our Family has been targeted,” Hannibal snapped, regretting his short temper when he saw Will wince.

“He’s terrorizing us,” Will began hesitantly, as Hannibal had heard him do when trying to work out the thought processes of another. “Fear is his weapon. He started with one of the new recruits, then a six-year veteran, and now a lieutenant. His next logical escalation would be one of us.” Fear lurked in the back of Will’s gaze, clouded by worry and lack of sleep.

Hannibal instantly flashed to the special exhibit tickets he'd secured as a surprise for Will, after noticing how the Romantic pieces had captured Will's attention the last time they'd visited the art museum. He loathed that fear caused him to question a night out with his husband. "How could he know our movements? To have someone on the payroll of every box office in town, to have a tail on every Family member, is impossible."

"He could've tapped the House phones," Will proposed, his voice and gaze distant as he lost himself in the scenario. "Gotten one of his own people recruited by us, working against us from the inside. It's not impossible, just very difficult to accomplish." Will's mouth twisted in a grimace. "He's incredibly patient. He enjoys watching people believe they control their own movements, when he's been controlling them all along. Guiding us where he wants us. Preparing us for the next move, gloating at our ignorance of his superiority over us."

"How can he gloat from a hundred miles away?" Hannibal speculated. "Even if he has one of his people working for us, they couldn't send him updates without arousing suspicion."

Will tipped his head back against the arm of the couch, his exhale sounding like defeat. "Do you know why he calls himself The Dragon?"

"I assume that dreadful tattoo he had emblazoned across his body. He displayed it at an Organization meeting," he explained, catching Will's curious glance. "It's a red dragon, wings spanning the backs of his arms and the body wrapping fully around his torso. He offered to show us the rest but decency prevailed and he kept the remainder of his clothes on."

"A large, red dragon…" Will muttered, rolling off the couch and heading toward the stairs.

Hannibal awaited his return, sipping the now warm wine that he had let languish as they discussed what could be done about Dolarhyde. Will's thunderous footfalls signaled his return, an open book thrust into Hannibal's hands.

"*The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*," Will declared proudly. "One of three paintings by William Blake. I remembered reading something about them last year. One was on display at a museum in Philadelphia. The article lamented its destruction as a priceless vision of good balancing out evil in an eternal struggle for dominance."

"It's destruction?" Hannibal inquired, staring at the grotesque painting. It wasn't a match for what Dolarhyde had inked onto his skin, but a quick glance at Blake's other paintings showed the striking similarities.

"I don't recall details of how it was destroyed, only that several people were hospitalized." Will waited patiently while Hannibal turned over this new information in his mind.

"Dolarhyde's tattoo couldn't have been done in one sitting. It would have taken years to complete." His finger tapped at the edge of the book. "After completing the dragon on his body, Dolarhyde steals a painting of a dragon. For what purpose?"

Will gazed across the room thoughtfully, though Hannibal was sure he didn't actually see what was right in front of him. Everything about Will was becoming The Dragon, getting

inside his head, learning who he was and what he wanted. “An escalation of his own. Coming into power. Letting that power consume him. Seeing others who have more. Desiring it, needing it to fuel his radiance.”

Breathing heavily, Will stared down at him. “After stealing the painting, his connection to The Dragon intensified, solidifying them as one being. But even that wasn’t enough. He sees others with power equal to his own. Unacceptable. *Unacceptable*,” Will hissed, one hand clenching into a fist as his eyes slip closed. “The Dragon is the chosen one. Only he can survive.” Will’s eyes snapped open and Hannibal ached for the vulnerability shining in them. “He has to kill you to take your power.”

Ignoring his own reservations on the matter, Hannibal attempted a smile. “He can’t touch me.”

Will blinked, coming back to himself. His voice was reed-thin as he asserted, “He already has.”

Hannibal leaned into the warmth of Will’s hand against his cheek, letting himself be soothed by the touch even as Will’s words rattled him. “I know seeing their bodies affected you terribly. Broken as if they were mere twigs, twisted into lumps of flesh. Transformed from men into discarded objects. You’ve transformed men, too, taking their pitiful existences and turning them into nourishment for your body. You both transform your enemies, just in different ways.”

He wanted to protest that he and Dolarhyde were nothing alike, but Will had a way of presenting the irrefutable facts that left little room for interpretation. “I made myself a target by my success,” Hannibal lamented.

“He sees you as his equal in power and he’ll do anything, kill anyone, to take it from you.” Terror widened Will’s pupils, his hand trembling slightly against Hannibal’s skin. “I can’t lose you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal covered Will’s hand with his own, drawing it down to press a kiss to the center of his palm. “I have no intention of letting him get near enough to try. I’m tightening the circle of those I trust with our personal agendas to the bare minimum. I’ll empty the house of everyone but our bodyguards. We’ll drive ourselves. I’ll cook for us.”

Will’s tremulous smile heartened him, but even as Hannibal laid out his wild plans, he knew they weren’t feasible. They were two powerful, independent men with lives that couldn’t be kept inside a protective cage.

“I adore you,” Will breathed, leaning down to press their lips together in a chaste kiss.

“My love for you is without constraint.” Hannibal’s vision clouded with red as he promised, “No matter what Dolarhyde claims, he is still a man, made of flesh and blood, and we will destroy him for threatening our House.” He brought Will’s mouth down hard against his own, driven by fear, without passion. Will met the kiss with equal fervor, a desperate edge of sourness sliding against his tongue.

They had taken every precaution, warned every member of their Family, but deep down, Hannibal knew it wouldn't be enough. They couldn't fight an enemy they couldn't predict. Dolarhyde knew him too well; it wasn't in Hannibal's nature to wait but until they had more information, it was all he could do.

Tasting the weariness in Will's kiss, Hannibal eased his husband down to straddle his lap, ignoring Will's sounds of protest as he worked Will's trousers open. "This will help you sleep," he murmured against Will's lips as he stroked Will to a gentle climax, taking Will's full weight as Will went lax against him.

Cleaning them up and covering Will with a blanket, Hannibal left his husband stretched out asleep on the couch as he made his way to his office, intending to work out new rotations to protect the lieutenants.

Hannibal's weary trudge was interrupted by Miss Katz informing him of a visitor.

"Agent Crawford, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Hannibal tried to remain as polite as possible, but with Will asleep and Dolarhyde to contend with, it was the worst possible time for a visit from the FBI.

Which made Crawford's timing impeccable, as always.

Crawford sounded almost happy in his pronouncement, "Dead bodies on your doorstep, Lecter. While I appreciate the change of pace from finding dead bodies at your enemies' doors, it's still murder and I'm here to investigate." Crawford stepped further into the foyer, eyeing the closed door to the small parlor. "You've managed to avoid me for months with the help of your lackeys. No more deflections, Lecter; *you* are going to give me answers today. You got company?" Crawford tacked on as though an afterthought, but Hannibal knew it was a deliberate calculation to distract him.

Hannibal wanted Crawford out of his home as quickly as possible, so he simply stated, "My spouse is taking a nap. I would appreciate you not waking him."

To his surprise, a strange mixture of remorse and anger passed briefly over Crawford's features. Remorse…surely not for Will, who was a thief long before Crawford had coerced Will into helping the FBI. Perhaps, then, it was that Will had ended up in Hannibal's bed, literally sleeping with the enemy.

Hannibal would have continued to follow that train of thought, but Crawford further surprised him by asking, rather than demanding, "Where can we talk?" as was Crawford's usual style.

He led Crawford into the larger parlor and invited him to sit in one of the chairs flanking a small table, taking the seat opposite. Not bothering with pleasantries, Hannibal inquired, "What answers are you after?"

Used to Hannibal's abruptness, Crawford flipped open a notebook and tipped his glasses down, studying his notes. "A year ago, you and Will Graham were nearly killed by a member of your Organization. I've yet to work out a satisfactory answer as to why Matthew Brown

wanted you both dead. It's rather telling that you've since married Will Graham, though he was last seen cozying up to Brown. That's a whole lot of coincidences piled up."

Hannibal leaned back and folded his hands in his lap, waiting for an actual question to be posed.

The pause stretched to an awkward silence, ending when Crawford huffed and flipped through several pages in his notebook. "You've signed for three deliveries, each containing the body of one of your men, is that correct?"

Hannibal bit back a weary sigh and simply agreed, "Yes."

Crawford's gaze bore into his as he asked, "Why haven't you alerted the police or FBI?"

Hannibal held Crawford's gaze, willing him to look away first. "What would you have done if I had? Harass every member of every Organization, shakedown every Head until a piece of evidence fell at your feet? Or would you have investigated from the shadows, barely disturbing the air as you watched and waited for another body to drop?"

Eyes narrowing in anger and suspicion, Crawford scratched something on a new page in his notebook. "Do you know who killed your men?"

"No," he answered honestly, as it was the truth. All he had were theories until evidence presented itself.

Crawford fixed him with a rueful smile. "Would you tell me if you did?"

Hannibal tipped his head slightly downward in acknowledgement of Crawford's insight. "Will wished to bring in the authorities when the last body arrived, but eventually he conceded that it would be a fruitless endeavor. We will not tolerate an attack against our House, so our investigation would be working at cross purposes to yours."

Crawford leaned forward, eyes shining with the fury of righteousness. "Our investigations wouldn't be at cross purposes. We both want justice for the murders."

"Agent Crawford," Hannibal smiled knowingly, "Our ideas of justice are oceans apart."

Crawford leaned back and grunted his agreement, studying the notebook intently before asking, "How did Will end up working for you? I thought I'd put him on the straight and narrow."

Hannibal had no intention of answering for Will, but then he felt the air disturbed behind him. Turning in his chair, Hannibal found Will standing just inside the doorway, exuding confidence and ease.

Will's eyes were still bloodshot despite his brief rest, but they locked onto Crawford's gaze unflinchingly. "Everything I've done in my life ensured my survival. Until I met Hannibal, who reminded me that life was more than surviving. Respect, joy, inspiration, family and love were things I'd rarely experienced, but here, I have them in abundance."

Hannibal slid his gaze from Will to Crawford, wanting to see his reaction. Disbelief, then anger, always anger, Crawford's voice rich with it. "You joined a criminal organization, Will. You've participated in illegal activities. I taught you to respect the law and now you're thumbing your nose at it. Where did I go wrong?"

Will's cold, sharp smile was reminiscent of the one he'd bestowed on Carlo Deogracias before Will killed him, delighting Hannibal as it had years ago. "Your mistake is thinking you had any impact on my life," Will replied in a bored tone. "You fed me and gave me a place to sleep. I'm grateful for that and being allowed to continue my education, but when I became of age, my life was my own and you weren't part of it. It's as simple as that."

Crawford looked a cross between confused and surprised, which Hannibal surmised was entirely possible. Crawford had always come across as a self-centered man, incapable of seeing from anyone's point of view but his own. Crawford had probably seen himself as a benevolent savior of a street thug, divorced from anything resembling reality. Hannibal's suspicions were confirmed when Crawford finally found his voice. "I came home from the funeral and you were gone. I worried that something…"

"You didn't give a damn about me and I accepted that a long time ago," Will interrupted quietly, leaving Crawford with his mouth hanging open. "Let's not pretend I was anything other than a tool at your disposal." The hard mask slipped away, revealing the cordial, polite man who hosted Heads of Organizations at their dinner table. "Now, how may we help you today?"

Hannibal was the first to stir from Will's mesmerizing performance, offering, "Agent Crawford wishes to investigate the three murdered men delivered to our doorstep."

"I wouldn't want Lecter-Graham House to be accused of interfering with a federal investigation." A ripple of unease chased down Hannibal's back as Will looked to him with a question lurking in his gaze. Hannibal minutely nodded his assent to whatever Will was about to divulge, trusting that Will knew best for their Organization and how much information would appease Crawford.

Will's tone was still distant as he addressed Crawford. "I didn't do a thorough inspection of the bodies, but I can provide written descriptions of their condition and list my observed details that may guide your investigation. If you require further details, come back to the house and ask for me, and I'll do my best to provide them to you." Will's tone hardened. "We will not tolerate any request to exhume the bodies. You know how my imagination works; any details I provide to you are as good as if you observed them yourself. There's no need to disturb the dead."

It was far more forthright than Hannibal had ever been with Crawford, but seeing Crawford's resigned expression thrilled him. Will had known precisely where to strike to limit Crawford's access to information while at the same time, making it seem like they were cooperating fully.

It was a brilliant strategic play. It warmed Hannibal that even exhausted, Will could be as ruthless as himself in protecting their Family.

Crawford was boxed into a corner and he knew it. “Of course,” he relented, looking pained as he said it. “Any information you can provide will be helpful.” Crawford closed the notebook, but Hannibal watched him rub his thumb along the edge in contemplation. “May I have a word alone, Will?”

Hannibal felt Will step closer and a hand settle gently on his shoulder, Will giving a quick, reassuring squeeze. “We have no secrets between us. Whatever you wish to discuss will be done in the presence of my husband.”

A sharp stab cut through Hannibal’s chest at Will’s declaration, leaving him breathless. For all of Will’s openness about his past, it was only then that Hannibal realized he’d kept something very important from Will. Not deliberately, but having kept the secret for most of his life, Hannibal didn’t consciously think about it; it simply was. With the unfamiliar clench of anxiety taking hold of his insides, Hannibal vowed that at the soonest opportunity, he would tell Will his secret.

He barely registered Crawford’s discomfort, only drawn back to the conversation when Crawford asked Will, “Did you know about my wife’s illness?”

Hannibal felt the subtle squeeze of Will’s fingers on his shoulder, as if steadying himself before answering. There was a softness to Will’s tone as he answered, “She had no choice but to reveal it to me when you went on the week-long trip to DC, a few months before she died.”

Crawford started nodding slowly, taking his time tucking the notebook and pen into his jacket pocket. “I’ll see myself out.”

Hannibal wasn’t about to let the man take a step in their home without an escort, but Will was already waiting, indicating Crawford should follow him. “Would you like me to send the paperwork to your office in DC or Baltimore?”

Hannibal’s mind raced as Will escorted Crawford to the front door. Will had lied to Crawford about his wife’s illness, he was sure of it. Why would Will want to spare Crawford’s feelings?

The hard set to Will’s jaw didn’t deter Hannibal from steering his husband into the chair vacated by Crawford, pulling the door closed behind them. “You promised to tell me about Phyllis Crawford one day,” he urged gently, half his mind on how he could steer the conversation to his own secret. “You would have noticed symptoms of her illness long before her death, I’d say almost a year out.”

The perfect host was nowhere to be seen as Will’s features crumpled, his eyes haunted and reflective. “A year and a half. Crawford was blind to it until he came back from DC. I don’t know if it was her happiness that triggered him finally seeing, or if she’d found peace with her imminent death and that clued him in. But whatever it was, he devoted every remaining minute to her, hovering day and night, smothering her. The one thing she didn’t want.”

Hannibal locked onto one phrase Will had uttered, along with the portrait of Mrs. Crawford among Will’s family, brought him to one conclusion. “You became lovers,” he mused, unsurprised that Will merely let out a quiet breath, not denying it.

“Only for four of the days that Crawford was away. It felt natural when we started and natural when it ended. Phyllis never said anything outright, but I knew she never wanted Crawford to know about us.” Will’s haunted gaze took on a gleam of remembrance and his lips curled up in the smallest of smiles. “She was kind, beautiful. Courageous. As graceful in death as she was in life.” Will met his gaze shyly and spoke about his first lover, gratitude the strongest emotion displayed by far. “As strange as it may sound, she set me on the path that led me to you.”

Hannibal was unsettled by Will’s remembrance. Not by the subject matter, but the trust Will showed him by revealing another cherished memory. The unpleasant bitterness of shame coated his tongue and of its own volition, his hand stretched across the table in a silent plea. With a beatific smile, Will slotted their fingers together, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

The relief he expected at his husband’s touch remained elusive. Revealing a secret kept so well-guarded was tantamount to holding a gun to his family’s head, and the tightness in Hannibal’s chest increased the more he hesitated.

He startled as Will squeezed his hand gently, his damp palm against Will’s more worrisome than his shortness of breath. He squeezed back, retaining a slightly firmer grip as he met Will’s gaze. “Her trust meant a great deal to you,” he started, clearing the tightness in his throat. Will’s gentle smile was encouraging, further unsettling him. “Your trust means a great deal to me as well. It’s only now that I realize…I’ve neglected to tell you something very important. About my past.”

Will returned his tight grip, sliding his other hand to cover Hannibal’s. “While I doubt there is anything that I wouldn’t forgive you for, I promise to listen to whatever it is you need to tell me without judgement.”

He had to look away as a rush of emotion caught in his throat and stung his eyes. “You know my father was killed when I was living abroad,” he began for background, though Will needed no reminding. “I had attended the finest schools in Europe and had retained many friendships, but I wasn’t visiting friends when my father died.” The well-known lie rolled off his tongue as it always had, but it tasted acidic. He met Will’s gaze and the trust and reassurance shining back at him were blinding.

“I’ve kept this secret since I was ten years old and now I’m entrusting it to you. Only a few people in the world know what I am about to tell you, and I hope you’ll understand why I...” Panic gripped him and Hannibal forcibly pushed it away. He trusted Will unconditionally and knew that Will would defend his blood family as fiercely as Will defended their Organization Family.

Will remained a steady assurance, quiet and confident as he waited for Hannibal to continue. With a weak, shaky breath, Hannibal declared, “I was at my mother’s family home in Italy, living with my mother and sister. They weren’t killed by a car bomb as we let the world believe. My father wanted them protected at all costs, so he smuggled them out of the country in secret and let the Family believe them dead.”

The silence rang in Hannibal’s ears. He saw Will’s eyes widen in shock and his lips part, but Will didn’t speak, as he’d promised. Hannibal took another moment before continuing in a

quiet voice, “I was able to speak to them briefly in my travels in Europe, as strangers admiring the same painting or sitting next to each other at a café admiring the passerby. Using the excuse of my studies, I called upon my mother’s household to enquire about residing with them while I attended university. I lived with them as a boarder until word came of my father’s death.”

Will’s expression was inscrutable, Hannibal completely thrown by not knowing what Will was thinking. He remained on edge, knowing this moment of truth between them was just as important as Will’s unveiling of his past with Crawford at their first meeting.

Eventually, Will’s expression took on the faraway look Hannibal was all too familiar with. Nervousness crept in while he waited for Will’s return to the present, growing more worried as the minutes ticked by. When Will blinked back to awareness and squeezed his hand tightly, Hannibal had to swallow around the lump in his throat.

There was pain shining in Will’s eyes, but not for himself. Will understood all too well what it was like to lose a parent, but he could also understand the ache of separation, though he had no siblings. For only the second time in their acquaintance, Hannibal didn’t envy Will’s gift. The strength to withstand another’s emotional state had to be staggering, yet Will bore it with grace.

“Was that the last time you saw them?” Will asked softly, threatening to destroy the tenuous hold Hannibal had on his emotions.

He nodded curtly, not trusting himself to speak. The old wound ached as though he were kissing his mother’s cheek goodbye again, raising a hand to Mischa as the carriage took him further from the estate.

“Thank you for entrusting me with your family secret. I promise to take it to my grave.” Something must have shown in his expression, as Will rolled his eyes in an affectionate gesture. “Were you expecting me to rail at you? Froth at the mouth in rage that you didn’t tell me on our wedding day? Or the day we met? Hannibal—” Will leaned over the table and pressed their lips together in a chaste kiss. “You did what you have always done: protect your family. And now I will do the same.”

Stunned to immobility, Hannibal suddenly grabbed Will’s face and crushed their mouths together, pouring everything he was into his remarkable husband. “I love you,” he proclaimed, only too late realizing that he’d never said it so plainly before, as he watched tears form in Will’s eyes.

Laughing, he stumbled to his feet, bumping his leg on the table as he enfolded Will in his arms, losing himself in the heat of his lover’s mouth. “Could you bear one more secret?” he breathed against Will’s lips.

Will laughingly kissed him. “I can survive *one* more.”

Grinning, he revealed, “My father’s family is of Lithuanian royal lineage and my mother is a countess in Italy.”

Will blinked owlishly at him, then dissolved into laughter. Hannibal was offended until he saw Will wiping tears away—a release from the tension that had gripped them the last three months.

“Are…are you saying you’re a Count?” Will asked, laughter dying away as Hannibal attempted to glower at him, but his heart was lighter with his shared secret and seeing Will relaxed for the first time in weeks.

“Yes,” he remarked as he held Will close, giving him a slow, sweet kiss. “And you, as my spouse, are granted the same privileges. It’s more an honorific these days, though I do still hold claim to my family estate in Lithuania, and by title, my mother’s estate in Italy.”

Will stared at him in wonder, tracing a fingertip along his jaw. “Count Hannibal Lecter?”

“The Eighth of his name,” he supplied, tracing the shadows beneath Will’s eye with the pad of his thumb. “I hate to see you like this. If I could draw Dolarhyde out, I’d slit his throat without hesitation.”

“If you could draw him out, the whole Family would open fire on him,” Will countered with an edge to his tone. His head dropped to Hannibal’s shoulder, a weary sigh accompanying the sagging shoulders. “I need sleep.”

Where Will tried to pull away, Hannibal held him closer. “You sleep better when I’m beside you.” Ignoring Will’s faint protest, Hannibal guided them up the stairs to their bedroom, easing into the bed beside Will.

Will’s head was on his chest in an instant, fingers curled over the buttons of his vest. “Thank you,” Will whispered, his body growing heavier as Will succumbed to sleep, leaving Hannibal to contemplate Dolarhyde while watching over his husband.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Dolarhyde forces a confrontation with Hannibal and Will, leading to the final showdown of their Houses. A bloody mess is left in their wake.

Tags for this chapter: Canon-Typical Violence, Rough Sex
Characters: Francis Dolarhyde, Bedelia du Maurier

The waiting had been the hardest part. Will dreaded the nights of a full moon, unable to stomach the hideous figures The Dragon chose for their returned Family members.

Hannibal never described them, bearing the burden of identifying the body while Will hid in the study downing shots of whiskey, afraid of the nightmares if he slept and afraid of the waking nightmare that greeted them every full moon.

Despite his fear, Will attended every funeral, his duties to the Family superseding his emotional turmoil. He didn't know what comfort his presence gave the grieving family, but he knew it was important for them to all stand as one against The Dragon.

He stayed behind at the gravesite of victim number six, Sylvester Rockwell, praying to a God he didn't think he'd ever believed in that this would be Dolarhyde's last victim.

It was a prayer that hadn't been answered for the past six months. Victim number seven would appear on their doorstep in 23 days unless something changed. Precautions were impossible against an enemy that moved like a shadow; how Dolarhyde chose his targets equally as impossible to determine. They were blind, deaf and dumb in The Dragon-controlled world. With a bone-weary sigh, Will turned to walk back to the car when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

A man, half hidden behind a tree, watching him intently. Will didn't recognize him as his Family, but he looked familiar. Taking a chance, he called out, "Blood and breath are only elements undergoing change to fuel your radiance."

The visible eye widened before the man stepped away from the tree, slowly making his way toward Will. The closer the man got, the more Will could make out his disfigurement, a long-forgotten memory of a photo in Crawford's study immediately laid over the face approaching him.

The fear, the nausea, the nightmares, all faded away as Will stood tall, hands in his coat pockets, silence descending until the only sound was of their breathing and the faint rustling of the wind.

Francis Dolarhyde didn't walk, he prowled, as sleek and confident as a predatory animal. Will didn't feel like prey; he felt powerful, summoning all his reserves of strength to face the man who had terrorized him for six months. "Would you prefer I address you as Don Dolarhyde or The Dragon?" he asked as Dolarhyde drew up to him, stopping with feet planted slightly apart in a dominant stance.

Dolarhyde's expression didn't change but Will could sense he'd pleased him. "I've absorbed The Dragon. We are one."

Curious at the phrasing, Will nodded in acknowledgement, respectfully keeping his chin and eyes lowered. He knew he was viewed as prey and it was only Dolarhyde's benevolence that kept him alive. "Why have I been graced with the honor of seeing The Dragon?"

"You are Lecter's mate." His choice of words intrigued Will, adding them to the picture he'd created of Dolarhyde. "You rule together."

"He controls three Organizations," Will carefully negotiated his way around Dolarhyde's statement, getting a feel for what he was after. "He granted me positions over the back rooms and contracts."

Dolarhyde's neck twisted like a wolf's scenting the air. "He gave you pittance. An appeasement for using you to further his rise in power."

Will conveyed his displeasure at the suggestion in the grim set of his mouth, acutely aware that Dolarhyde somehow knew their every move and would instantly know a lie. Reluctance laid bitter on his tongue as he countered, "A wedding gift I was honored to receive. He values my judgement and counsel."

He was considered, Dolarhyde's eyes stripping him of all pretense, laying him bare. "Trust is not known among our kind, yet trust exists between you because of your gift." Will kept his breathing even as Dolarhyde moved closer to him and caressed his cheek. "You have a beautiful, rich mind, Will Graham."

"You honor me," Will murmured, keeping his gaze fixed on Dolarhyde's chin. When he felt pressure on his jaw, he tilted his head up, raising his eyes to meet Dolarhyde's for the first time. Intelligence, insanity and confidence made for a very dangerous mix. Will tried to take it all in, glean everything he could, his lips parting as he saw traces of desire amid the chaos.

It was an aspect he hadn't considered, but he closed his eyes as Dolarhyde leaned in to kiss him, the cleft lip feeling strange against his own. He returned the kiss gently, briefly, not wanting to presume anything.

He leaned into Dolarhyde's caress of his hair, as one would reward a beloved pet. He kept his eyes closed until he sensed he had permission to look, seeing a possessive glint added to Dolarhyde's heavy gaze.

"You will bring me Lecter." It was said in a low, hypnotic voice, as if he were luring Will into doing his bidding. Despite himself, Will was almost spellbound; Dolarhyde was very charismatic. "When I have absorbed him, I will transform you."

“Yes,” he agreed, surprised at how breathless he felt. He found himself unable to look away as Dolarhyde began to step back, the coldness once again biting into his exposed skin. “When?”

Dolarhyde’s smile was a cruel, twisted thing and sent fear racing down Will’s spine. That was his only answer, as Dolarhyde turned and walked away, leaving Will shaking.

Will continued to shake, pressing his lips together as he fought back nausea. Dolarhyde had been close enough to *touch him* and he didn’t reach for his gun or knife, instinctually knowing he would never have gotten to either in time.

He knew he was alone, but he held back the bile threatening to choke him until he made it back home, afraid that Dolarhyde had people watching his every move. Ignoring Beverly’s worried shout as he ran past her, he nearly slid on the bathroom tile as he threw up in the toilet, gripping the bowl as if it was a lifeline. Throat raw and stomach empty, he continued to gag, fighting the instinct to tear his lips off and scrape his tongue raw, though Dolarhyde’s kiss had been chaste. For an animal.

An animal that was coming for him and Hannibal in 23 days, on the night of the full moon.

“Are you all right, Will?” Hannibal’s concern contrasted with The Dragon’s gentle persuasion and Will threw out his hand to keep him away.

“Don’t touch me,” he snapped, dragging himself to his feet, barely able to stand. He leaned heavily on the sink, twisting the tap and rinsing his mouth out, the warm water doing nothing to ease the chill that had settled along his spine. “In 23 days he’s coming for us. And he’s going to kill you.” It was finite, an absolute truth Will knew to the very core of his being.

“You’ve seen Dolarhyde. He was at the gravesite?” Hannibal asked, voice rising in disbelief.

“Don’t bother sending anyone. He’s gone,” Will mumbled around his chattering teeth. He was *so cold*.

He stiffened when Hannibal’s arms encircled him, not wanting the comfort. “If I’d tried to reach for my gun, he would have snapped my neck,” he said with certainty. “I listened to him, I learned who he was and he *terrified* me,” he admitted, finally accepting Hannibal’s embrace. He tucked his head into Hannibal’s neck, his body greedily leeching Hannibal’s warmth, the shivers eventually fading to exhaustion. “I’m so tired.”

“His attacks have left us all drained,” Hannibal said, hugging him closer. “But you most of all. You have no mental defenses against such cruelty. You take everything in but you aren’t able to let it go.”

He felt flush, ashamed that Dolarhyde had gotten inside his head and twisted his feelings. That even for a moment, he’d believed that they didn’t have a hope of stopping Dolarhyde. He brought his arms around Hannibal, holding him tightly as he vowed, “I will fight for you until my last breath.”

“I will tear Dolarhyde limb from limb,” Hannibal replied, his tone dark with promise.

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The next twenty-three days went by a lot faster than the previous 30-day intervals, Will's nerves on edge as he climbed into the back of the car. Hannibal's purchase of the opera tickets had been contrived to draw Dolarhyde out and their route to the opera house would take them all over the city.

Will had taken no chances that evening—his knife was in his pocket, a spare tucked into his boot, the gun snug at his shoulder and another one in the pocket of his coat. He'd wanted to argue with Hannibal about his lack of preparation, choosing to wear only his standard shoulder holster, but in the end, he knew it wouldn't matter how many weapons they had.

The Dragon was coming to get them that night and it was only a matter of time before he struck.

Will didn't know how prophetic his thoughts would be as their car was slammed into from the side, sending it spinning off the road. The car didn't roll but they were banged up and dazed, Will's head spinning as he was yanked from the car and thrown onto the ground. He felt himself being picked up, mumbling an objection before he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was thankful for the low light. As his eyes adjusted and his vision swam, he heard a voice in the distance. The low rumble of The Dragon, a droning cadence that continued as Will pushed himself to his feet and stumbled to the doorway, holding himself against it as he blinked at the scene.

Hannibal, unconsciousness and propped up in a leather chair with Dolarhyde pacing in front of him, agitated and angry.

He winced as Dolarhyde threw a pitcher of water on Hannibal, barely stirring him. Will tried to focus on Hannibal's face but it kept blurring into red streaks, his mind finally clicking that Hannibal had a head wound. Touching his scalp delicately, Will realized he had dried blood on his face and neck too, which would explain the blurry vision.

Dolarhyde was *furious*, repeatedly slapping Hannibal's face and demanding he wake up. Hannibal was precariously slumped in the chair; another slap and he would slide to the floor.

"Dolarhyde," Will called, his voice too weak to carry across the large room. "Dragon," he tried again, this time drawing Dolarhyde's attention.

"You said he was powerful," Dolarhyde growled, clamping a hand around his upper arm and dragging him over to Hannibal, throwing him toward the chair.

Will's shoulder banged hard onto the floor and the wind was knocked out of him, but he stopped short of rolling into Hannibal's legs. Cheek pressed to the floor, limbs spread where they'd landed, Will could only stare at Dolarhyde's feet as his body protested any further movement. "I said he controlled three Organizations. There are different types of power."

Dolarhyde stalked over to him, worn boots filling his vision before one stepped on his upper back, the edge of the boot pressing into his neck. "You speak but you say two things at once.

Duplicitous liar."

Will could scarcely breathe; a shift of Dolarhyde's boot and his neck could be snapped beneath the heel. Rather than the swift death he expected, Will was hauled to his feet and brought nose to nose with Dolarhyde, anger and lust blazing within the insanity-filled gaze. "Your transformation cannot occur until after I've absorbed Lecter. You will bear witness."

Will was thrown onto a couch and felt the jarring of his bones as he landed. Dolarhyde was superhumanly strong; adrenaline-fueled strength wouldn't be enough to fight him. Will slipped his hand into his coat pocket, but the gun was gone. It would be too difficult to get to his shoulder holster through his coat and jacket, and he wasn't sure if he could reach his father's knife without stirring Dolarhyde's suspicions.

He took in the room with a sweep of his gaze, looking for impromptu weapons. They were in a parlor with Victorian-style furniture and small table lamps, nothing solid enough to knock Dolarhyde unconscious. Feeling as though he'd missed something, Will gave the room a more thorough look. No mirrors on the walls, no picture frames, no reflective surfaces of any kind…except for the broken mirror on the table. Beside the table on the floor was a blanket cut into the shape of wings, layers of old stains crusting the fabric in flakes of varying red—the blood of his enemies.

Will's stomach heaved as he finally realized what Dolarhyde meant by *absorb*. It wasn't a spiritual metaphor or ritual killing. It was absorbing power into himself…through sex. Taking through domination and force.

A weak moan proceeded the slap of skin against skin, Hannibal being dragged back to consciousness by Dolarhyde's hand.

"Lecter," Dolarhyde snarled, gripping Hannibal's hair and pulling his head back. "The power you wield isn't in your hands," he accused as he backhanded Hannibal, sending Hannibal gracelessly to the floor and banging his still bleeding head against the wood. "It's in your *head*, useless. Weak."

Dolarhyde crouched over Hannibal's prone form, man-handling him by his hair until Hannibal was flat on his back, barely lucid. "No matter. All power feeds The Dragon."

Will was out of time. He couldn't maneuver his body around to get his hand into his trouser pocket, but he felt thin hardness against his ankle. He slipped his fingers inside his boot to retrieve the knife, slowly easing it open and hiding it in his palm.

As Dolarhyde dragged Hannibal feet-first onto the blanket, Will tried to inject as much indifference into his tone as he called out, "If that's how you absorb power, I've already fucked it out of him. If I'd known that's how you did it, I could have saved you all this trouble."

While success meant Dolyarhyde's attention was drawn away from Hannibal, it meant that the madness-filled eyes were focused on him. Will leaned back on the couch, adopting a relaxed pose while his insides twisted in anxious knots. "Didn't you know?" he taunted. "I'd kill my researchers if I were you."

He could see movement just out of focus behind Dolarhyde, but kept his gaze firmly on The Dragon, trying to gauge when he would move. When it happened, it was lightning-fast, a hand around his throat and squeezing before Will could blink.

Will lashed out with the knife, feeling it impact four, five, six times, but still the pressure continued, narrowing his vision and filling it with black dots. His lungs burned, desperate for air. He was too weak to do more than hold onto Dolarhyde's arm, feeling the muscles bunch underneath clothes and skin as they choked the life out of him.

Shots rang out and Will sucked in a precious breath, coughing as his lungs filled with fresh air. Dolarhyde staggered around to face Hannibal, still lying on the floor but now with a gun in one hand.

Hannibal emptied the gun into Dolarhyde's chest but still he didn't fall, roaring as he shuffled toward Hannibal. Clenching the knife in his fist, Will jammed it into the side of Dolarhyde's neck, wincing as blood sprayed everywhere.

Dolarhyde swung around, his fist connecting with Will's cheek and sending him rolling across the floor, opposite to where Hannibal was. Will stopped rolling in time to see Dolarhyde drop to his knees, the impact shaking the floor. Blood pooled beneath Dolarhyde in an ever-growing puddle from the multiple gunshot and stab wounds, but it was still another minute before he took his last breath, his presence as large in death as it was in life.

Still trying to ease the ache in his lungs by taking in too much air, Will crawled over to Hannibal, who had flopped onto his back.

Will placed his hand on Hannibal's chest, feeling its uneven movement. "Ha—" was the only sound he could make; his throat felt like it had been scraped raw by the pieces of broken mirror.

Will felt the rumblings in Hannibal's chest as his name was groaned, anxiously waiting for Hannibal's eyes to open. When they did, they were unfocussed but aimed directly at him. "Did he…touch you?" Hannibal whispered.

Will's fingers curled in Hannibal's wool coat, grounding them both. He shook his head, not bothering to attempt to speak again.

A weak laugh, then another groan and Hannibal sat up, arm wrapped around his torso. "Think he broke a rib. Is there a phone?"

Will held out his hand and together they stumbled to their feet, searching the house for a phone and address, finding both on a foyer table. A quick call to the House had Beverly promising to gather Chilton and head up there immediately with the lieutenants in tow, but she was still an hour away.

An hour with Dolarhyde's corpse and their wounds and his own pounding head. Directing Hannibal to the couch he'd been on, they sank onto it with twin sighs, leaning on each other but not letting the other doze off.

“Saint George must have been watching over us,” Hannibal murmured. It was a curious statement and Will made an inquiring noise through his sore throat.

“Patron saint of Lithuania,” Hannibal explained, groaning as he shifted to a better position. “I’ll light a candle for him when we get home.”

Hannibal was not religious, so the reference nagged at Will until he recalled the story of a man defeating a dragon and saving a town from human sacrifices. There were similarities, but their victory over Dolarhyde wouldn’t be lauded down the ages. The most they could hope for was an end to the brutal killings.

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Will barely heard Chilton’s diagnosis of a mild concussion, more concerned about Hannibal’s injuries. The pronouncement of merely bruised, not broken ribs, echoed their lives.

Will met Hannibal’s shrewd gaze and returned a short nod, both of them dismissing any further treatment from Chilton. They would face Dolarhyde’s people bloody and bruised, their appearance proclaiming their victory over The Dragon. Will had not been present at an offer of fealty before, but he knew that they needed to use everything at their disposal to keep Dolarhyde’s people unbalanced.

Dolarhyde’s body was propped up against the backseat car door, ready to be used as a shield from gunfire. Will waited for Hannibal to choose where he would sit; either beside the body or in view from the other window.

Hannibal chose the middle of the backseat, Will slipping in beside him, adrenaline keeping him alert and focused.

Beverly drove them the remainder of the way into Pittsburgh, their car leading the caravan of Family to The Dragon’s House.

Dolarhyde’s people scrambled to form a defense as their entourage pulled up, shouts bringing reinforcements from deeper inside the House. Will was on the side facing away from the House so he slipped out of the car, lending his borrowed gun to the fight.

Hannibal waited for the opportune moment, then shoved Dolarhyde out of the car, the dead Don’s face showing clearly in the moonlight.

Gunfire slowed, then stopped altogether as Dolarhyde’s people recognized their Don. Hannibal stepped out of the car, standing over the body, *daring* the enemy to shoot him.

Will edged around the car to Hannibal’s side, keeping a sharp eye out for movement from the stunned silence that now faced them.

Sensing Hannibal bending down next to him, Will grasped Dolarhyde’s other arm and together, they dragged the body through the front door and dropped it in the main room. Resigned and angry faces greeted them, maintaining their eerie silence.

Beverly, Jimmy and a handful of others all had their weapons drawn behind Will, ready to kill whoever made a move toward him or Hannibal, but no one raised their weapon. It was the silence of the defeated, of the acknowledgement that their Don wasn't the strongest, wasn't the most powerful. Wasn't *worthy*.

Hannibal hissed, "Fealty, *now*," not brandishing a gun or uttering a threat.

Will savored the victorious feeling as, one by one, Dolarhyde's people dropped to one knee and bowed their heads, submitting to the ones who *were* worthy.

Will leveled his gun at those still standing. "Yield," he whispered, unable to speak any louder through his bruised throat. At their sneers, he aimed at their heads and pulled the trigger, killing two before the gun clicked empty.

As Will reloaded, Hannibal aimed his gun at the next man standing, only for him to drop to his knees and choke out, "Yield."

Neither uttering another word, Will and Hannibal methodically disposed of the rest that refused to kneel, Will feeling a vindictive edge to the smile curving his lips.

"Take us to your meeting area. Gather everyone and have them present themselves before us," Hannibal announced once the dissidents had been sorted out.

Will deferred to Hannibal to go into the meeting room first, Beverly and Jimmy keeping an eye on their backs. He sat at Hannibal's right, the still-warm gun resting on his thigh as Will studied each of Dolarhyde's people, getting a feel for them.

Hannibal's voice never lost its commanding presence as he asked of everyone who knelt before him, "Do you pledge your fealty to Lecter-Graham House?"

To those that hesitated or had twitchy fingers, Will quietly repeated, "Yield." Calculating gazes flicked between them, not knowing which was more likely to show compassion. Will found it amusing; neither he nor Hannibal were known for their mercy but the defeated always looked for that last reprieve.

Will winced as blood sprayed across his face, Hannibal's distaste in having to use his gun palpable. When the next hesitated to bow over his ring, Hannibal ripped out their throat with his teeth, the others coming to heel quickly.

As Dolarhyde's people knelt before Will, foreheads touching his pinky ring, he asked, "Who is the traitor in our House?" When Will sensed fear, he pressed the heated muzzle of his gun against their temple. When they remained silent, he pulled the trigger. When he ran out of bullets, he opened his father's knife and slit their throats, wrinkling his nose in distaste as another one of his suits was ruined.

In just a few hours, they'd eliminated half of Dolarhyde's people within the House, but at last they had the traitor's name. Saul Gispano, a member of their Organization for two years longer than Will. The betrayer would be punished and if the light in Hannibal's eyes was any indication, it would be excruciatingly slow and painful.

Will tilted his head back against the chair to rest while their people cleared the bodies out of the House, stacking them in and around the car to be burned. He rubbed at his sore throat, barely able to swallow. The right side of his face was swelling, Hannibal's bruised cheeks, split lip and black eye a testament to Dolarhyde's abuse.

A spike of fear at how close Dolarhyde had come to killing Hannibal sent Will's hand seeking reassurance, closing loosely around Hannibal's wrist and thumbing over the pulse.

Steady. Always steady. A rock upon which their Organization stood, proud and tall, reflecting the best of both of them.

Hannibal returned his gaze, warmth and understanding softening his eyes to a rich caramel color. Will's hand was cradled between Hannibal's hands and bestowed an affectionate kiss, arousal simmering in his gaze. Will felt an answering whisper of desire, always just beneath the surface when he was in Hannibal's presence.

A different sort of whisper caught his ear, several of Dolarhyde's people staring at them openly, murmuring to themselves. Hannibal quirked an eyebrow in askance, Will shook his head minutely. He'd heard *The Lamb* before, rumors coming to him from the streets as *The Cannibal* used to all those years ago.

It had irritated him at first, but now Will found it fitting. A helpless Lamb, seducing with his guile and beauty, a smile on his face as he slit the throat of his enemies. Or, to others, the New Testament Lamb, sent to break the seals and descend righteous wrath upon the world.

As the car with the bodies piled around it was set aflame, Will let out a sigh of relief, eager to get home and wash the stench of death from his body.

In a reversal of expected behavior, Will placed his hand between Hannibal's shoulders to guide him to the front door, confusion following in their wake.

"Could they ever understand?" Hannibal asked as they breathed in the crisp, cold night air.

The full moon was high in the sky, reflecting its light onto their battered, weary faces. For the first time in six months, its presence didn't trigger a coil of dread in the pit of Will's stomach.

He stared at the moon but didn't have to contemplate an answer to Hannibal's cryptic question. Their own people still had trouble understanding their unique relationship; that Will didn't submit to Hannibal nor did Hannibal submit to him, but that they submitted to each other. The difference was subtle, but it was as natural to them as breathing and the foundation upon which their Organization thrived.

"No," he rasped, swallowing thickly against his bruised throat and curling his fingers around Hannibal's outstretched hand. No longer needing to express himself with words, he squeezed Hannibal's hand and tiredly climbed into the back of the waiting car.

The first thing they did upon arriving back in Baltimore was drag the traitor out of his apartment and lock him in the steel room. The isolation would slowly drive him mad, left alone to imagine his punishment before he would be allowed to die.

As far as Will was aware, Hannibal hadn't taken any meat from their enemies in nearly a year, too focused on Dolarhyde to worry about anything else. Despite the late hour and their exhaustion, Will felt Hannibal's anticipation of a fine meal in his future.

Will kissed his husband before separating from him at the door to the study. Hannibal preferred the shower in their bedroom, but Will didn't care where he bathed as long as the water stayed hot until he was finished.

Finally rid of the unclean feeling coating his skin, Will pulled on his boxers and trudged up the stairs to their bedroom, crawling into bed and groaning as the aches in his body began to make themselves known. He sighed contentedly as Hannibal slipped in behind him and curled around his body.

Will looked forward to the mundane tasks of assimilating Dolarhyde's Organization into theirs. If it meant slaughtering half of those that remained, all the better.

His sleep was uninterrupted by dreams that night.

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They were enjoying breakfast in the dining room, Will reviewing the contracts for his meeting that afternoon, when Zeller knocked on the door, interrupting them.

"Excuse me Mr. Lecter, Mr. Graham. Bedelia du Maurier is here."

Will huffed and set his cup down with force, sloshing coffee over the lip. Du Maurier's temerity was mind-blowing. Her meeting wasn't scheduled until eleven and it was barely half past eight. They still had *breakfast* on the table.

The flicker of annoyance in Hannibal's expression was quickly smoothed away as he patted his lips with his napkin. "Give us a moment, then send her in, please."

Zeller nodded and closed the door behind him, giving them their privacy.

Will fixed Hannibal with a sour look. "Why are you catering to her blatant power play?" After weeks of sorting through Dolarhyde's vast holdings, corralling his people, and setting up a permanent Lecter-Graham House presence, Will had looked forward to a few hours of peace. Her early arrival stretched the bounds of Organization decorum and Will would love nothing more than to make her wait until her appointed time.

But that would reflect poorly upon their House and Will was as prideful as Hannibal when it came to presenting themselves well to the other Organizations.

"No doubt she wishes for this meeting to be over with as much as we do," Hannibal assured him. "The nightmare of Dolarhyde is nearly behind us, but I must know what motivated her to help us identify him as the culprit."

Will grunted softly in agreement. He couldn't deny his curiosity at du Maurier's indirect help, but he still bristled at her impropriety.

A knock at the door had them righting themselves quickly, Will putting the contracts back in the folder as Hannibal stood and buttoned his jacket. Will blanked his expression as du Maurier entered the room and ignored him to walk straight to Hannibal, extending her hand in greeting.

“I apologize for my early arrival,” she said, not a drop of repentance in her tone. “My train leaves in an hour and I couldn’t exchange my tickets.”

Hannibal kissed her knuckles politely, Will seeing the stiff set to his shoulders as he bent over. “You remember Will Graham, my husband?” he said, ignoring her excuse.

The richness and pride in Hannibal’s tone, the slight dig as he emphasized *husband*, made heat curl in Will’s stomach. “Miss du Maurier,” he said politely, barely pressing his lips to her satin gloves.

“Mr. Graham.” Her voice was too *knowing* as she cut a glance over to Hannibal. “I do hope you’ve put my wedding present to good use.”

Will kept his expression flat but he was curious; Hannibal hadn’t mentioned a gift from her.

“It was thoughtful of you to include a gift,” Hannibal answered tightly, curiosity burning brighter within Will. “Most only sent a congratulatory card. Please,” he offered, extending his hand to the empty chair at the other end of the table.

Du Maurier sat but didn’t remove her gloves. “My time in Baltimore is short, so I’ll get straight to the point. Francis Dolarhyde had targeted three Houses in the Midwest before starting on the East Coast Organizations. Mine was your predecessor.”

Knowing how Dolarhyde absorbed his victims’ power, Will studied her carefully, but her mask was firmly in place, not revealing a trace of her emotions.

As if sensing his thoughts, du Maurier addressed him. “His thinking was old-fashioned. He did not believe a woman could run an Organization, despite seeing me at Organization meetings. For every protest I raised that I was the Don, he killed one of my people.”

“He absorbed them,” Will corrected, setting his elbow on the table and resting his chin lightly on his thumb, framing his mouth with his fingers. He had nothing against her people, but knowing that Dolarhyde had *hurt* her twitched his muscles into wanting to smile. He knew he showed no other signs of gratification, but her narrowed eyes said that his pleasure had been picked up on.

Dismissing him with a pointed look down her nose, she focused her attention to Hannibal. “Against my strict orders, my bodyguard claimed my House as his. What was left of Henri wasn’t recognizable as human.”

Will’s stomach clenched as his nightmares flashed behind his eyes, bodies twisted and broken and turned inside out. But deeper than that, the low thrum of anger flared to life.

“When Dolarhyde finished with your House, did you send him to ours?” Hannibal asked, the thinnest thread of coldness in his tone.

She lifted her chin, holding Hannibal’s gaze in defiant pride. “I warned you as soon as I was well enough to travel and again when you visited me. I didn’t dare speak directly about him for fear of who might be listening.”

Her answer was unsatisfactory, Will mirroring Hannibal’s annoyance at the deliberate evasiveness.

“An understandable precaution, but you didn’t answer my question, Miss du Maurier,” Hannibal’s tone was clipped, the formality indicating his anger. “Did you send him to us in the hopes we could defeat him?”

She offered a challenge in the tilt of her head, but only sincerity shone from her expression. “I could no more control Dolarhyde than the sun.”

“Control, no,” Will interjected serenely, finally sensing a weakness. “But you are skilled at persuasion. Dropping hints that yours was not the most powerful House, that others held sway over you. Turning his belief that a woman couldn’t control a House into an advantage. He was very intelligent but susceptible to his own ego. Much as you are. I think this meeting is concluded, don’t you, Hannibal?” he asked his husband, never once looking away from du Maurier’s cool gaze.

Her polite veneer cracked as Hannibal stood and agreed, “I wouldn’t want you to miss your train, Bedelia. I hope you’ve enjoyed the sights, as this will be your last visit to Baltimore.”

She held her head high as she stood up, glaring at each of them in turn. “You’re no longer securing my safe passage through Maryland?” she asked, deliberately misinterpreting.

Will met Hannibal’s inquiring gaze with a short nod, infuriated at her presumption.

Hannibal’s cold, hard gaze slid to her. “We are formally denying you access to Lecter-Graham territory. You are hereby ordered to avoid Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania on your travels. You are denied access to our ports, harbors and roads for shipments. You are not permitted to send people in your stead to acquire assets of any kind.”

“You’ll strangle my Organization!” she decried, an outraged flush coloring her cheeks.

Will’s quiet threat cut through the ensuing silence, the smile he’d held back now stretching his lips easily. “Better your Organization that your neck.” Calmly, deliberately, he stood and buttoned his jacket before rounding the table, extending his arm toward the door.

Du Maurier’s confidence wavered, nervously glancing between him and Hannibal, looking for a reprieve. When Hannibal remained silent, staring her down, a slump of her shoulders indicated her defeat, but she quickly pulled herself back together.

Will stood silent until she turned to him, though avoided his gaze. “I hope you have a safe trip back to New York,” he offered. “Mr. Zeller will escort you to your car.”

He held the door for her, waiting until she was about to pass him before lightly touching her shoulder. He could feel the tension beneath even that gentle touch and her eyes glared hatred at him. “May I ask, what did you send for a wedding gift? Hannibal never shared it with me.”

A gleam joined the anger staring him down. “A bit and bridle from my farm, fitted for a human.”

Heat flared up his neck, embarrassment robbing him of speech for a moment. But only for a moment. Her triumphant air faded as his mouth curved in the smile he reserved for Hannibal after a particularly rough, exhausting round of sex. “It’s a shame you wasted the effort. Hannibal loves my teeth on him as much as I love his teeth on me. Restraining our passion isn’t in our nature.”

He would pay for that remark later, feeling Hannibal’s heavy gaze on him, filled with promises and lust. Gooseflesh rose in anticipation.

Du Maurier’s look was much more sour, though Will didn’t sense disgust from her, but rather a hint of admiration. He hoped it was for his quick rebuttal, but he had a sickening sense it was because of what he’d revealed about their sex life.

Hannibal was *really* going to let him have it. He couldn’t *wait*.

Will’s overstimulated, exhausted body was finally allowed to rest sometime near eleven. Hannibal had kept him riding the edge of orgasm, then forced him to climax three times, well past his body’s limit of pain tolerance. His ass burned from the continuous friction, his wrists were bruised where Hannibal had held him down and his shoulders and neck throbbed where Hannibal’s teeth had sunk in.

A chaste kiss was placed on his forehead as he was cradled gently in Hannibal’s arms, Will’s smile of contentment pressed against Hannibal’s chest. “Shall I send a thank you note?” he teased, enjoying the lassitude in his muscles. It had been some time since he’d been fucked-out so thoroughly and he intended to repay Hannibal’s kindness….in a week or so.

“You’re lucky I burned that atrocity as soon as I saw it,” Hannibal threatened breathlessly, as exhausted as Will from the exertion of the past several hours.

Will rubbed his nose against Hannibal’s chest hair, loving the way it tickled. “You have more inventive ways of shutting me up.”

A hand in his hair tightened, then smoothed down to cup his cheek. “Sleep, my tempting chameleon,” Hannibal rumbled, the hint of an order in his tone making Will’s smile widen. Heeding his husband’s wishes, Will closed his eyes and let his body go lax with sleep.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

> Set roughly ten years after the last chapter. Hannibal and Will are drowning in the administration of their House. When a lifelong goal is achieved, are there any challenges left?
>
> Tags for this chapter: Rough Sex, Anal Sex, Intercrural Sex, Top Will Graham, Canon-Typical Violence.
>
> Thank you for reading through to the end. I appreciate you all! I posted a prequel about Will's time in Chesapeake City.

Hannibal wearily took his seat in the quiet car on the train, settling his cane next to him. Visiting the bordering Organizations was always a chore, but this year seemed especially draining. Will had to host the New England Organizations at Lecter-Graham House while Hannibal charmed and reassured the South and West Dons that they had no interest in overtaking their Houses.

And, it was the truth. Hannibal had always dreamed of expansion for his House—extending down the eastern seaboard and across the south, only stopping at the Mississippi River to the west.

The reality of controlling the Middle Atlantic Region was far removed from his idealized dream, and it was only a quarter of what he'd once envisioned as Lecter-controlled territory. They were drowning in the daily, weekly and monthly minutiae. He and Will couldn't

shoulder more responsibilities and still maintain control of their people. It was the sole reason that Bedelia du Maurier still managed New York.

Their embargo hadn't hurt du Maurier's Organization in the two years it was enforced. Confronting her with the choice to pledge her fealty or die, she smugly presented her books. Her clients were powerful, wealthy and influential: businessmen, politicians at every level, even law enforcement, and they would never allow her Business to be shut down. Hannibal despaired at the staggering amount of administration needed to run her Organization. Du Maurier alone had nurtured the relationships with her clients and the subtle nuances would take years to master, if her clients would even work with them.

That wasn't something he and Will could undertake, so they allowed du Maurier to continue administration with a 20% yearly fealty paid to their House.

Hannibal was tired; not just in body, but in mind and spirit. He was spry and fit for having just turned 50, but after six weeks away from home, away from Will, he felt double that in age.

The challenge was no longer there. He'd achieved what he'd set out to do: bring order to the chaos of Organizations. A war hadn't broken out between Houses in seven years, not counting their own attempt to overthrow du Maurier. Petty squabbles and border skirmishes were quickly negotiated to a peaceful resolution. Everyone seemed to be settled contentedly into their Territories, no one thirsting for more power.

The FBI had noticed and now the Organized Crime Task Force was nothing more than a handful of desk jockeys, Jack Crawford having been forced into retirement two years previous.

Without Crawford to play his little mind games with, Hannibal had thrown himself wholeheartedly into societal circles, attending galas, openings and performances. It had helped, for a time. The upper crust of society were often catty, easily manipulated with a well-placed word or glance. When Will joined him on his outings, he was subjected to the disapproving downward tilt of Will's mouth, but Will's eyes always sparkled with mischief.

If Will hadn't come into his life, Hannibal might have been satisfied with acquiring the lesser Houses and devoted his life to his original expansion of Lecter House. Will had shined warmth on his cold, fact-driven plans, expanding the possibilities beyond the acquisition of buildings and money. Power without someone to share it with was a cold bedfellow, indeed.

Hannibal needed a greater challenge. He needed a change. He needed *something* to stave off the advancement of time and his increasing boredom.

Pulled from his thoughts by the train pulling into his stop, he gathered his bag and greeted Mr. Gumb before stepping into his awaiting car.

He needed to speak to Will about his restlessness before Will questioned him about it and demanded answers he didn't have.

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Hannibal's limp was more pronounced as he entered the House, the cool weather aggravating the old bullet wound in his thigh. He handed his bag and cane to Mr. Gumb, giving him a polite nod.

He wasn't sure if Will's hosting duties were finished or if a Don was still lingering in their House. He and Will always coordinated their annual visits so they spent as little time apart as possible, but sometimes guests didn't want to leave their hospitality. It was both a point of pride and a nuisance.

Hannibal maneuvered up the stairs, listening for movement behind the doors. The door to the study was wide open, Will sitting at his desk, nearly invisible amid all the paperwork piled around him. "Is a break permitted to greet your husband?" Hannibal asked, forcing amusement into his tone.

Tired eyes lighting up, Will was immediately up and away from the desk, molding to his body like a second skin. Will's normally sweet kiss was edged with hunger that Hannibal shared; they had been apart too long.

"As much as I would love to greet you properly, Dortlich isn't set to leave for another hour," Will lamented, resting their foreheads together.

Hannibal closed his eyes and breathed in, tempering his disappointment. Enrikas Dortlich controlled Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, making him a small but very rich Don who expected special treatment. That he was the last to leave their House didn't surprise Hannibal in the least. "Dinner tonight?" he asked, reluctant to let Will go.

"I asked Chef Gerald to prepare something special," Will replied, stealing one last kiss before pulling away, his eyes lingering where his touch couldn't.

"Unless it's you laid across the table, it shall be mediocre at best," Hannibal said, delighted to see that even at 40 years of age, the tips of Will's ears could still turn pink with embarrassment.

"Get cleaned up; you smell like old feet," Will grumbled as he retreated back behind the desk, unable to hide his smile.

Hoping a bath would shed him of his melancholy, Hannibal reclined in the tub, willing each muscle to relax until his mind was completely blank. Only when the water became uncomfortably cold did he emerge, dressing in fresh clothing before turning down the bed.

Will met him at the bottom of the stairs, a relieved smile unable to hide his tiredness. "Perfect timing, as always. Dortlich is on his way back home and dinner is served."

Hannibal hated that Will looked so drained. Will should have been on the road while he stayed home playing host, as they had done in the past. But grumblings from the neighboring Dons about favoritism had forced the change, leaving Will without the buffer of travel time to adjust to the Don's different personalities.

Overcome with the need to be as close to Will as possible, Hannibal swept Will into a heated, open-mouthed kiss. He smoothed his hands down Will's back, cupping just under his ass to press their bodies together. He was rewarded with a hitch in Will's breathing and arms tightening around him, the urgency of Will's kiss asserting his own need.

Reluctantly breaking the kiss before dinner could grow cold, he bade Will go into the dining room first, closing the doors behind them. The enticing aroma of lemon and capers immediately filled the space and Hannibal inhaled appreciatively.

"Kidneys with crushed broad beans," Will announced as they took their seats.

"It smells divine," Hannibal said, able to tell the kidneys had been cooked to perfection even without slicing into them. He tucked in without further ado, his appetite returning with a vengeance after the appalling offering on the train.

It was several moments before he noticed the comfortable silence held a note of anticipation. "Did something come up during your meetings?" he asked as he took a sip of wine.

There was a slight catch in Will's voice as he said, "Dortlich mentioned the increasing problem of homeless in and around Boston."

When Will didn't continue, Hannibal set down his utensils and gave Will his full attention. "You brought him a solution."

With Hannibal's help, Will had set up shelters in all their major cities where the homeless and orphaned could eat, sleep and find work. Named after his father, RWG Centers were funded in perpetuity through a trust fund that Will had set up through their lawyer. It was not an endeavor Hannibal would have considered in his original plan, but the benefit to the cities and the people living in them was undeniable.

Will's smile was fleeting and sad. "I explained what our Centers could do, but he's reluctant to let us have a foothold in his Territory." His enthusiasm returned somewhat, a hint of sarcasm lacing his next words. "He did extend an invitation to his expansive home in Nantucket whenever we'd like to visit."

Hannibal took another sip of wine, gathering his thoughts quickly. "He's a numbers-driven man. I'll start pulling data from the cities where we've instituted the Centers. Give me a week and a half, two weeks at most, and I'll have a presentation ready for you to deliver to him."

He could feel Will's heavy gaze on him and it wasn't entirely pleasant, the bite of irritation piercing Hannibal's skull. That irritation bled into Will's tone as he stated, "While I'm grateful for your support, you just got back today and you're ready to leave again in two weeks?"

He took up Will's hand, tugging gently when Will resisted. "Will," he chided gently, bringing Will's knuckles to his mouth. He brushed his lips back and forth over Will's skin, waiting for the tensed fingers to relax. Will's ire wasn't directed at him, but at Dortlich's short-sightedness. Hannibal also suspected Will shared his restlessness but was reluctant to be the first to bring it up.

Pressing a brief kiss to Will's hand, Hannibal said, "Every minute I spent apart from you felt like days, and the days stretched into months. This would be a trip we take together, presenting a unified front. While it's true I'm weary of travel, with you at my side, it would be bearable."

Will huffed as a smile coaxed its way across his lips, always reluctant to give in to Hannibal's perfectly rational ideas. "Only bearable?" Will teased lightly, turning their hands and placing a lingering kiss on Hannibal's knuckles.

"Yes," he answered, revealing more truth than he intended. "Do you tire of it?" Hannibal asked, impulsively seizing the moment. "The endless meetings, the paperwork, the monotony?"

He watched, fascinated, as Will shuttered his emotions while withdrawing his hand. "It's our responsibility," Will replied resolutely, avoiding directly answering the question.

It also wasn't a denial. Hannibal picked up his fork and knife and cut off a piece of kidney, offhandedly remarking, "It should have been mine alone. You didn't ask for it; I thrust it upon you without consultation."

"Don't you *dare*," Will hissed, eyes blazing with anger and guilt. "This Organization is the best thing that could have happened to me. What I do *matters* to people. We aren't some two-bit thugs who shake innocent people down for protection. We make our cities *better*. We make our *people* better. I have a purpose here and I'll be damned if I let you belittle it."

Will's anger battered at him, but Hannibal could see the truth just beneath the surface. With a sorrowful smile, he asked quietly, "Are you convincing me or yourself?"

Will's anger faded as quickly as it sparked, leaving slumped shoulders and a downcast gaze.

Hannibal took up Will's hand again, squeezing softly. "I thought of little else in the six weeks I was away, but in truth, this has been building for quite some time. I need to know if I'm alone in my restlessness."

Will's gaze flicked to his, uncertain, then met him square on. "You're not alone." A weight seemed to fall off Will's shoulders at the admission, Hannibal finding himself matching Will's straighter stance. "I didn't know how to articulate my feelings without sounding petulant. Yes, reading the same reports over and over gets dull, but who else would you trust with protecting our House? We're not like other Organizations. We don't rule through control and intimidation. We've earned the respect we're given. We've earned our peoples' loyalty. I'm proud of how we run our Business," Will added stubbornly, as if that had ever been in question.

Hannibal felt lighter than he had in months, relieved that he and Will were once again in perfect synchronicity. "My darling chameleon. Your only goal in joining this House was to have security and I gave you half an Organization to run." He half stood and coaxed Will's lips to part with a gentle rasp of his tongue, feeling the tug of Will's fingers in his hair to deepen the kiss. "And you've done it beautifully."

Desire raged in Will's half-closed eyes, calling to the fire that was rising in Hannibal. "We're done eating."

"Yes we are," he agreed. Leaving their half-eaten dinner on the table, Hannibal led the way upstairs, slipping off his jacket as they entered the bedroom. Opening eagerly to Will's desperate kiss, he methodically stripped Will of his jacket, vest and tie, only pausing for his own vest to be removed and tossed aside.

He leaned in to lightly suck at Will's neck, feeling fingers tighten on his hips as Will's head tipped back, giving him more room. After so many years together, they could ignite the other's passion with pinpoint accuracy, Will's neck as sensitive as Hannibal's nipples.

Hannibal's lips skimmed over skin, his tongue leaving a wet trail that he then gently blew on, loving the arch of Will's back and the low moan it always drew. He sucked skin between his teeth, biting just hard enough to hear the catch in Will's breathing. He steadied Will with a hand low on his back, the restless shifting of Will's hips telling Hannibal that he was about to be shoved onto the bed and ravaged.

More than ready for Will's touch, Hannibal gently bit just below Will's ear, holding flesh between his teeth until he felt Will's nails clawing at his back.

Freefalling with Will was exhilarating: Will crawling over him before Hannibal fully landed on the bed, immediately reaching for each other as if even that brief separation was too long. Lips parted for their tongues' explorations, chasing the taste of fine wine and the spicy meal as their hands removed the rest of their clothing.

Hannibal pulled Will's shirt from his trousers, needing to feel more skin beneath his hands. Will's fingers skimmed over his exposed chest as Hannibal's shirt was unbuttoned, tugging gently at his chest hair and teasing around his hard nipples.

The kiss devolved into a primal rutting as lust surged through Hannibal, teeth snagging on Will's lips and his tongue pressing harder, demanding submission.

They never discussed who was going to dominate in bed. It happened naturally as they progressed, the subtle give and take not just to heighten arousal, but to ask and answer the question.

As fiercely as Hannibal needed to see Will shake apart beneath him, Will had turned savage, jerking his head away from Hannibal's mouth only to change the angle of attack. Forcing his tongue between Hannibal's lips, Will *took*, pressing Hannibal's wrists to the bed as his body covered Hannibal's, not giving him room to breathe.

Hannibal relented with a groan, no longer fighting for control but matching Will's aggressiveness.

Will tore away from his mouth to bite at his neck, panting harshly against his overheated skin. As Will sucked at his Adam's apple, muscles tensed in anticipation of where that wicked mouth was going next.

Will gave him no quarter, immediately sucking on a nipple and rolling it between his teeth. Body jerking with the shock of lust that thickened his erection, Hannibal pushed up into that punishing hold, silently begging for more. Fingers pinched his neglected nipple, Hannibal's hips slamming up into Will's as it was twisted and pulled.

The dual assault had Hannibal's erection leaking, trapped within his trousers and beneath Will's weight. It was beautifully cruel and Hannibal relished the pain, hitched breaths and shivering body exposing his pleasure at the rough treatment.

Will switched sides, nails scratching through his chest hair before digging into his nipple, while teeth scraped along the other one. Hannibal's shaky exhale ended on a moan as Will licked the nipple and breathed on it, the nipple hardening and Hannibal's hips jerking again. "Please," he gasped, rolling his hips up into Will's, asking for what they both had been denied for so long.

Green eyes eclipsed by black desire, Will granted him mercy as he stripped them both of clothing and settled back over him, bare skin to bare skin. The hot, hard length of Will pressed against his own and Hannibal had to move, had to relieve the ache that resided in his chest for the past six weeks.

He locked his arms around Will, biting at Will's lips when he struggled. "Give me what we both want," he growled, punctuating his demand with a slow roll of his hips, dragging their lengths together in sweet friction.

Impossibly dark, impossibly wide eyes met his, the frantic need receding. Will's next kiss was gentle, loving and apologetic; calmness at the center of the storm.

Reluctant to lose contact with Will for even a second, Hannibal kept his hand over Will's heart as Will prepared him, the stretch and tease testing the limits of Hannibal's control.

"*Will*." He laced his husband's name with the threat of violence when he felt Will's thumb rubbing his rim, four fingers already inside him to the second knuckle.

The strain of Will's control pinched the corners of his eyes and mouth, the hand stretching Hannibal trembling slightly. Eyes lost to desire stared down at him, the swollen lips parting slightly on a moan, the breathless, "*Hannibal*," so filled with need, Hannibal's heart leapt into his throat to choke him.

Eyes locked on one another, Will's erection replaced his fingers, pressing in slow and deep until Hannibal's eyes were forced closed with the sense of *completion* that overwhelmed him.

They remained like that, connected at the basest level, hearts pounding in their throats, neither willing to move first and break the perfect spell that had befallen them.

But desire would not be denied, and Will's hips gave a helpless little shove on a pained whimper, his control ready to snap.

Knowing what would get him what he wanted and push Will over the edge, Hannibal hissed, "Fuck me," groaning at the first punishing thrust. He clutching at Will's shoulders as his legs

were forced back onto his chest, Will's eyes wild and desperate as he drove himself to climax.

Neither of them would last long; Hannibal already felt the tightness starting at the base of his spine, the exquisite beauty of Will lost in his own desire driving Hannibal closer to his own climax.

"Ha—Hann—" Will gasped as his hips continued their punishing rhythm, the helpless longing etched in his tight expression an apology for using Hannibal for his own pleasure.

Hannibal knew that feeling well; he'd felt it intimately many times before and would do so again, because that is what they did to each other. They drove each other from their civilized suits, stripped each other down to their baser selves and celebrated the carnal pleasures of the flesh. "I won't fuck you until you come," he said, knowing exactly what it would do to Will.

As if a switch had been flicked inside him, Will's hips stuttered and he shouted, "Oh *fuck*," Hannibal drinking in the sight of Will coming apart above and inside him.

Still shaking from the strength of his orgasm, Will had the presence of mind to pull out carefully and collapse next to Hannibal on the bed, face buried in the sheets.

Hannibal was so close to orgasm himself, he didn't know if he'd be able to hold off until he prepared Will. Stroking from the nape of Will's neck, down the curve of his spine and over the swell of his ass, Hannibal made his decision.

Covering Will's body with his own, Hannibal pushed his erection between Will's thighs and rolled his hips. Will's high-pitched moan caused his oversensitive skin to break out in gooseflesh but he kept his unsteady rhythm, every part of him rushing to climax.

When Will crossed his ankles and squeezed his thighs, when Will arched his back and shoved his hips backward, Hannibal succumbed, the heady rush of pleasure momentarily blinding him.

Breathing heavily, muscles sore and his thigh protesting its rough treatment, Hannibal belatedly registered the muffled, "Too hot," from beneath him.

Groaning, he rolled off of Will, flopping onto his back and throwing an arm over his eyes, waiting for his heart to leave his throat and return to his ribcage. "Okay?" he asked, voice gruff and raw-sounding.

"Yeah," Will groaned, not sounding much better as Hannibal felt him shift around. "You?"

The pleasant numbness was beginning to wear off, the aches and strain in his muscles uncomfortable but not worrisome. "Fine." he answered. He removed his arm from his face as Will rolled over, caging him between his arms.

Eyes soft with understanding greeted him, the warm smile remaining as it pressed against his lips. "Liar," Will murmured, his smile deepening until the crinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes. His smile settled to a solemn line. "I missed you."

“Never again,” Hannibal promised, frowning at the disbelieving noise Will made. “The tedium of administration is numbing, but being without you was misery.”

Will didn’t hide his emotions; he let them fill his expression, love and appreciation and wonder, before he kissed Hannibal passionately. “You said you thought about this while you were away. Did you come up with any ideas?”

“No,” he admitted, sweeping the short curls off Will’s forehead, his respectable haircuts never able to fully tame them, for which he was grateful. “But now that we’re both working on the problem, I’ve no doubt we will find a solution.”

Will’s contemplative silence went on for several minutes. “What about your plans to own the entire eastern seaboard?”

“A dream that has lost it’s appeal,” he replied morosely. “Five of the Houses would surrender without a fight and three others with minimal resistance. There’s no challenge in overcoming the weak. Adding eight more Territories would only increase our administration overhead. It’s not worth the effort.”

“Not even to control the largest Territory in America?” Will asked quietly.

It was a drastic change from his original plans, but Hannibal was convinced that even if he controlled the entire eastern half of America, it wouldn’t be enough to soothe his restless. His…dissatisfaction ran much deeper than that. “Not even to control the largest Territory in America,” he whispered against Will’s lips, pulling him into a gentle kiss. “We have plenty of time to discuss options, but I’ll start on the data for Dortlich tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” was murmured against his lips, and Hannibal returned the kiss tiredly, their activities and his long journey dragging him into sleep.

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Hannibal had packed his backlog of foreign newspapers to read while Will was giving his presentation to Dortlich, and delved into them over an expresso. He always checked the London papers first, searching for a tidbit about Mischa. She had married an English Duke some years ago, their wedding photo published in the society pages along with gossipy tales of their romance in Spain. He’d hoped for a small anecdote about the birth of a child over the years, but Hannibal could find nothing about his sister.

He idly flicked through the Spanish, French and Austrian papers, but the Italian newspaper gripped him. *Mafia Wars*, the headlines declared, along with photos of fires, bombed-out buildings and streets littered with bodies killed by Tommy guns. A police station wall had been bombed out, killing the men that it had been meant to spring. Life meant nothing to these people.

The Territory wars weren’t over state or city borders, but who controlled each street. Neighborhoods were sacred and crossing into the wrong one without permission would see you losing fingers or worse.

It was brutal and cruel, uncaring if innocent people got in the way. Recruitment wasn't an option; you either joined or your house was burned down and your family either thrown out or killed.

It was ruthless.

It was utter chaos.

It was exactly what Hannibal needed.

He kept his revelation to himself, not wanting to spoil Will's glowing, happy mood. Dortlich had succumbed to Will's charms and Hannibal's numbers, and would provide a list of suitable buildings to open the first RWG Center outside of Lecter-Graham Territory.

It was impolite to engage in sexual relations while in the home of another Don, but Will's mouth and hands were insistent and Hannibal too relaxed now that he'd found his purpose again.

Will once again claimed the dominant role, driving into Hannibal with the singular focus of the victorious. Hannibal arched into every thrust, leaned into every touch, moaned into every kiss, drowning himself in the desire that consumed them both.

Heedless of his objections to prolong the ache of *too much*, Will stroked him to orgasm, Hannibal spilling helplessly over his own stomach. Seeing him lost in pleasure ignited something primal in Will, and tears stung Hannibal's eyes as Will buried himself deep with his own completion.

Will's forehead rested on his shoulder, humid breaths panted against his overly warm skin. He grasped at the short hairs on the back of Will's head, wanting to keep him there, reluctant to separate for even a second.

Will's hand pressed against his chest, fingers pushing up through his chest hair and thumb flicking idly over his extremely sensitive nipple. Shocked at the sensations curling low in his gut and hissing at the half-hearted twitch his dick made, Hannibal gripped Will's wrist and removed it from his chest.

Chuckling, Will raised his head to meet Hannibal's eyes. Smile sliding over into a smirk, Will breezily commented, "You were very coy at dinner. What has your devious, clever mind come up with now?" Hannibal was wary as Will leaned down for a kiss, but couldn't stop his moan as it turned filthy, slick tongue and confident teeth leaving him breathless.

"A solution," he declared, drawing his hand along Will's back to curl around his shoulder. "A new challenge worthy of both of us."

A sweet, lingering kiss soothed the teeth marks Will had left but a minute ago. "And are you going to share this challenge with me, or will I have to torture it out of you?" Will's fingertips pressed into Hannibal's side, threatening to tease sensitive, ticklish skin.

Excitement thrummed through his veins as he asked, “What would you say about a trip to Italy?”

Calculating, wary eyes met his, and Hannibal saw the second that it all clicked. “You want take on the Italian Mafia,” Will breathed, voice barely above a whisper and filled with trepidation.

“Not right away,” he conceded, hand cupping the side of Will’s neck and giving a gentle, reassuring squeeze. “But I would like to establish our House on the other side of the Atlantic.”

Will studied him again, eyes losing their focus as Will sank into his thoughts. Hannibal waited patiently, smoothing his thumb along Will’s stubbled jaw until clarity filled Will’s eyes. “You want to go home.”

Hannibal’s breath caught in his chest. It hadn’t been a conscious thought, but hearing Will vocalize it, it resonated down to Hannibal’s bones. He *did* want to go home. He wanted to see his mother, now in her 70s. He guided Will to his lips, kissing him softly. “You should meet your family.”

Tears shone in Will’s eyes as his kiss was returned and their night dissolved once again into passion.

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Hannibal breathed in the scent of lilac as the elegant, regal woman enfolded him in her arms, kissing his cheek. It was undignified for a Countess to show such emotion and for a Count to lose his composure, but it had been over 25 years since he’d seen his mother and propriety be damned.

It was long, long minutes before they laughingly parted, Hannibal leaning into his mother’s palm against his cheek. Coming straight to the Sforza estate from the airport had been Will’s idea, and Hannibal had resisted at first. Habits of a lifetime wouldn’t be overcome in a single trip, but Hannibal found himself crumbling as soon as the doorman greeted them.

Tears prickled his eyes as he took her frail hand in his. “Mother, I’d like to you to meet my husband, Will Graham. Will, my mother, the Countess Simonetta Sforza.”

To Hannibal’s surprise, Will bowed his head and uttered in passable Italian, “A pleasure to meet you, Lady Sforza.”

Her delight was palpable. She left Hannibal to grasp both of Will’s hands, leaning in to press a kiss to each cheek. Though it wasn’t overly visible, Hannibal knew his husband was blushing under the attention. “It is a very great pleasure to meet the one who healed my son’s broken heart,” Simonetta proclaimed in English, eyes crinkling much like Will’s did when he smiled, though right then, he looked stricken.

Hannibal closed his eyes as his mother’s laughter rang out, echoing down the corridors in his mind.

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you, my dear,” Simonetta said, looping Will’s arm through hers and guiding him toward the sitting room, Hannibal following a step behind. “I’ve worried for him since he was a small boy, always so serious. So focused. I don’t suppose that’s changed any?”

Hannibal could see Will’s profile as Will guided his mother into a chair, and the twinkle in his eye spoke of payback. “Not a lick, Lady Sforza, no matter how much I’ve tried to distract him.”

His mother’s knowing look cut straight into Hannibal’s chest and left him feeling eight years old. “I’m sure you put up an admirable effort, my dear, but I know how headstrong my son is.”

He sweated under her gaze, relaxing only slightly when she turned back to Will. “And please, call me Simonetta. Formality is for guests; you are family, Will.”

Family. Will.

Hannibal was home.

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Hannibal strode into the room first, Will a step behind him but not stopping until they were side by side.

The roomful of Dons would intimidate lesser men, but Hannibal was in his element, having come straight from killing a despicable Don who was abusing his wife. Will had blood flecks on his cheek from his own kill, the severed finger clenched in his hand still wearing the Don’s insignia ring.

“Gentlemen and ladies,” Hannibal began in Italian, searching each snarling face in turn. “My name is Hannibal Lecter of House Lecter-Graham in America. This is my husband, Will Graham of House Lecter-Graham. We’d like a seat at your table.”

“Insufferable Americans,” the Don seated to the right of the head of the table grumbled, his haughty smile matched by a few others. “You are not L'organizzazione.”

Hannibal remained silent until the murmured agreements died down, Will's gaze sweeping the room before stating in English, "I don't think they recognize our names."

"Perhaps our reputations?" Hannibal suggested. "Graham the Lamb?" he pronounced in Italian, catching a few flickers of recognition. "Hannibal the Cannibal," he declared with an acknowledged tilt of his head. More recognition of his name, and an unease rippled around the room.

Satisfied that he had made his point, Hannibal produced the severed hand of Don Luigi Amonetti, the man he'd killed two hours previous. He tossed it onto the table so it landed in front of Don Georgio Cutavelli, the Boss of the Italian Mafia. He quoted their own manifesto

back to them, “The one who takes the ring, takes the House. I claim Don Amonetti’s House for Lecter-Graham.”

Will stepped forward and placed the ring of Don Seralgio on the table next to the severed hand. His Italian was rudimentary but clearly understood: “The one who takes the ring, takes the House. I claim Don Seraglio’s House for Lecter-Graham.”

Hannibal waited a beat in the stunned silence, then he and Will took the two empty seats at the table, all eyes on them.

Hannibal carefully, meticulously folded his hands on the mahogany table before him, smiling at Boss Cutavelli. “So, what’s on the agenda today?”

The End

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